

INFORMATION  
COMMITTEE

First Report

THE PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF  
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Report, together with the  
Proceedings of the Committee,  
Minutes of Evidence and Appendices

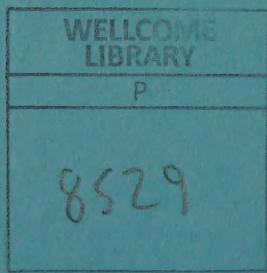
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*Ordered by The House of Commons to be printed*  
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## INFORMATION COMMITTEE

18 July 1991

## Standing Order No. 125

(1) There shall be four Select Committees to consider the services provided for the House in regard to the following matters:

1. Accommodation and Works
2. Administration
3. Catering
4. Information.

(2) Each committee appointed under this order shall consist of seven Members and the quorum shall be three.

(3) Each committee appointed under this order shall have the assistance of the Officers of the House appropriate to the matters under consideration.

(4) Each committee appointed under this order shall have power:

- (a) to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place, and to report from time to time;
- (b) to appoint specialist advisers either to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the committee's order of reference;
- (c) to communicate to any such committee, or to the Finance and Services Committee appointed under Standing Order No. 125A, or to the Broadcasting Committee appointed under Standing Order No. 125B, or to the House of Commons Commission, its evidence and any other documents relating to matters of common interest; and
- (d) to meet concurrently with any such committee, or with the Finance and Services Committee, or with the Broadcasting Committee, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence.

(5) Each committee appointed under this order shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on House of Lords Offices or any sub-committee of that committee, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee or sub-committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.

(6) Each committee appointed under this order shall have power to make recommendations to the House of Commons Commission or to Mr Speaker; but any such recommendation whose implementation would incur additional expenditure from the Votes for House of Commons (Administration) or (Works) shall also be considered by the Finance and Services Committee.

(7) Each Committee appointed under this order shall have power to make rules and give directions to Officers of the House in respect only of such administrative matters as may from time to time be determined by Mr Speaker or by the House of Commons Commission.

(8) Unless the House otherwise orders, all Members nominated to a committee appointed under this order shall continue to be members of that committee for the remainder of the Parliament.

The Membership of the Information Committee since its appointment on 21 November 1991 has been as follows:

|   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Sir Fergus Montgomery (Chairman) ( <i>Altrincham and Sale</i> ) | Sir Ian Lloyd ( <i>Havant</i> )     |
| Mr Spencer Batiste ( <i>Elmet</i> )                             | Mr John McFall ( <i>Dumbarton</i> ) |
| Mr Andrew F Bennett ( <i>Denton and Reddish</i> )               | Mr Gary Waller ( <i>Keighley</i> )  |
| Mr Huw Edwards ( <i>Monmouth</i> )                              |                                     |

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# FIRST REPORT

The Information Committee has agreed to the following Report:

## PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

### I. BACKGROUND

1. Although the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) commenced operation in April 1989, its origins date back to the first half of the 1980s. At that time many Members and Peers became aware that there were an increasing number of matters related to science and technology issues which they were being asked to address. As POST's Memorandum to the Committee pointed out<sup>1</sup> they saw an increasing need to provide Parliament with an organisation which would undertake an impartial assessment of the scientific and/or technological background to such issues.

2. As a result, a delegation of interested Members and Peers met the then Prime Minister in 1986, and although the proposal received a positive response, public funding was discouraged at that time. One of the delegates who attended that meeting, Sir Gerard Vaughan, MP, giving evidence to the Committee in his capacity as a Board Member of POST, told us that the Prime Minister gave him a very clear impression that "the House of Commons Commission would be more likely to support [POST] if [POST] could show within the House that it was needed and what kind of information [POST] could produce".<sup>2</sup> Instead of public funding it was suggested that the all-party Parliamentary and Scientific Committee might provide a suitable channel for funding the proposed organisation in its initial form.

3. The Parliamentary and Scientific Committee provided (and still provides) Members of both Houses, scientists and industrialists with an opportunity to meet regularly and to discuss matters of mutual interest. Although in favour of the proposal to fund POST that Committee had (and, still has) limited financial resources and had never carried out any work of the type envisaged for POST. It therefore decided to set up a fund-raising charity, the Parliamentary Scientific and Technology Information Foundation (PSTIF). Following initiatives by Members and Peers, funds were raised, in most cases on the basis of a pilot experiment lasting three or four years, from large technology-based companies; institutions such as the Royal Society and the Fellowship of Engineering; charitable foundations such as the Nuffield Foundation and the Gatsby, Wellcome and Leverhulme Trusts and some individual Members of both Houses.<sup>3</sup> As a result, POST began the pilot experiment in April 1989.<sup>4</sup>

4. In 1991, before the new domestic committees (including the Information Committee) were appointed following the agreement of the House to the report by Sir Robin Ibbs, the attention of the Services Committee was drawn to the likelihood that the funding would cease at the end of the experimental period in April 1993. That Committee decided to undertake a survey of Members' opinion of the services provided or planned by POST and sought to establish whether public funding would be supported. Thirty seven per cent of Members responded to the questionnaire of whom 74 per cent supported the proposition that there should be "an increase in the amount of parliamentary support on science and technology based issues". Similar results were forthcoming from an identical survey of Members of the House of Lords.<sup>5</sup> It has to be said, however that these surveys were somewhat superficial.

5. After reviewing the results of the survey the Services Committee agreed on 16 July<sup>6</sup> that "the House of Commons Commission be asked to consider making funds available for this purpose at a level appropriate to the needs [of POST] bearing in mind both the level of demand from Members for services of this kind and the relative priority to be accorded to other demands for new or expanded services for Members".

6. On 24 July, the House of Commons Commission considered the Resolution of the Services Committee, and agreed that "the new Information Committee should be invited to consider the nature of the service which might be provided by POST, the co-ordination of such a service with those already provided by the Library, and the financial needs of POST".

<sup>1</sup>Ev p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Q 4.

<sup>3</sup>Ev p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>For a diagram of POST's organisational structure see Ev p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>The surveys are summarised in POST's Memorandum (Ev p. 7).

<sup>6</sup>HC 1990-91, 209-iv p. v.

## II. THE CURRENT INQUIRY

7. At the first meeting of the newly-appointed Information Committee, on 12 December 1991, the Committee considered, *inter alia*, the Resolution of the House of Commons Commission. It decided to take oral evidence from the POST board and from the Librarian<sup>1</sup>, and to seek memoranda from, (in addition to those giving oral evidence) some of the funding organisations (the Leverhulme Trust, the Nuffield Foundation, the Wellcome Trust); the Fellowship of Engineering (who provided office accommodation); Research Councils and the Royal Society; the Lords Science and Technology Committee and the Science and Technology sub-committee of the Education, Science and Arts Select Committee<sup>2</sup>. Support for the concept and continuation of POST from these organisations has been virtually unanimous.

8. The Committee also decided to ask the Director of Finance and Administration to submit a memorandum on the options for financing POST.<sup>3</sup>

9. The Committee wishes to record its gratitude to all those who gave evidence both oral and written or otherwise assisted the Committee. In particular we are grateful for the advice of the Librarian, Mr Dermot Englefield, and for the financial guidance given throughout the inquiry by the Director of Finance and Administration, Mr Jim Rodda.

10. The inquiry was undertaken at the earliest moment after the Committee was set up. Nevertheless the prospect of an imminent dissolution was with us throughout the inquiry. In the time available, we have reached a number of conclusions designed to give some assurances that the work of POST may continue in some form. However, several important issues, including the scale of the resources which may need to be devoted to this work in the longer term, and the relationship between the Board of POST and the relevant committees of the House, will require further examination by our successor Committee in the next Parliament.

## III. PRESENT ACTIVITY OF POST

11. It is the aim of POST to complement and not duplicate<sup>4</sup> other resources available to parliamentarians such as the Libraries of both Houses. The particular characteristics of POST's work as stated in their memorandum<sup>5</sup> are:

- (a) Subjects are selected by a cross-party consensus according to utility and relevance.
- (b) No [Civil Service] departmental or [scientific] disciplinary boundaries are imposed on the work.
- (c) POST makes extensive use of scientific and technological resources outside Parliament through consultation, provision of information and review.

12. The current (and recent) activity of POST can broadly be split into four areas:

### (a) *Briefing Notes*

These are issued at approximately three week intervals while either House is sitting. They usually consist of three or four pages and are made available free of charge within the Houses of Parliament and sold to interested customers outside. The subjects are selected by POST's Board (taking account of current and possible future interest of Members and Peers). They have covered such diverse subjects as human embryology, computer misuse, energy efficiency, the National Curriculum, and global warming.<sup>6</sup> The preparation of briefing notes relies greatly on the expertise available to POST through the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee and many of that Committee's members have contributed information or advice.<sup>7</sup> Occasionally briefing notes have been prepared relating directly to legislation being considered in Parliament. We understand that considerable interest has been shown in the content and form of these notes within the UK and elsewhere.

### (b) *Technology Assessment*

It is more than 20 years since the US Office of Technology Assessment began to pioneer the technique of technology assessment, which is intended to analyse and if possible to assist legislators in resolving conflicting information and views on major and often complex

<sup>1</sup>Ev pp. 18 and 32 respectively.

<sup>2</sup>See p. xxii for a list of Appendices to the Minutes of Evidence.

<sup>3</sup>Appendix 2.

<sup>4</sup>For discussion on the potential for overlap see section IV below.

<sup>5</sup>Ev p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>See Ev p. 14 for a full list of subjects.

<sup>7</sup>The "invisible college" referred to by Professor Sir Hans Kornberg see Q 11.

science-based issues. Parliamentary technology assessment on a more modest scale has since been established in a number of analogue parliaments in Europe (e.g., in France, Germany, Netherlands).<sup>1</sup> The technology assessments prepared by POST are intended to be an exhaustive, often anticipatory, analysis of an issue with, usually, possible policy options identified. They may be as long as 150 pages or more. Because of the fairly limited resources and the time-consuming nature of technology assessment, POST has so far produced only four, on Technologies for Teaching; Research and the NHS; Relationships between Defence and Civil Science and Technology; and High Performance Computing.

(c) *Work for Select Committees*

This subject area can be further sub-divided into "pre-inquiry" briefing and work intended to support or amplify an existing inquiry. The briefing before an inquiry can be produced reasonably quickly and could be useful in assisting a select committee in deciding whether to undertake an inquiry. The more detailed work during an inquiry, which would usually be requested by a select committee, is likely to take a similar form to the technology assessments described above. POST stated in their Memorandum that their work for select committees was "still evolving"<sup>2</sup> and in oral evidence Sir Gerard Vaughan MP, admitted that POST "has not yet had the relationship with select committees which [he] thought it would in the future".<sup>3</sup> Dr Norton, Director of POST, told us that the work done by POST so far "has been composed of two short briefings for the Environment Committee: one on passive smoking, one on marine protection". POST has also briefed another select committee prior to a decision whether to undertake a particular inquiry. Most importantly, one of the first technology assessments, on computers in schools, attracted "the interest of the Education [Science and Arts] Committee who considered following that . . . with an inquiry".<sup>4</sup> The Science and Technology Sub-Committee of that select committee confirmed that it was "wholeheartedly in favour of the proposition that POST should be financed by the two Houses".<sup>5</sup>

(d) *Westminster Fellowships*

We have noted with interest and approval the development of the Westminster Fellowship scheme by the POST Board. This was initiated to second professional scientists and engineers to work with Parliamentarians for short periods. The first such fellow was appointed in September 1989, supported by a grant from the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS) and undertook, in the words of that committee, "to research and draft briefing material on scientific and technological issues of Parliamentary concern for Members of both Houses of Parliament." This scheme has, according to that organisation, proved so successful that, with generous support from the Nuffield Foundation, four further Fellows were recruited to work with POST for consecutive three-month periods in 1991. A further fellowship has just been announced (on the environment) in February 1992.

#### IV. WORK OF THE LIBRARY AND THE POTENTIAL FOR OVERLAP

##### *Work of the Library*

13. One of the Research Divisions of the Library is dedicated to Science and Environment matters. It was originally established in 1966 in response to Members' requests for "more information and research on scientific issues and their implications for public policy".<sup>6</sup> It is currently the smallest of the Library's research sections, with an establishment of three research posts and four Library professional and support staff. Nevertheless the Librarian informed us that the section "deals with a growing volume of enquiries from individual Members requiring written replies (1,320 in 1991) and at the same time provides papers on science-related topics of public and parliamentary concern".<sup>7</sup>

14. The Section also maintains the Library's database in the subject areas for which it has responsibility. This involves analysis of the available material (books, specialist periodicals, parliamentary papers, press notices and other public documentation) and inputting the references into the POLIS<sup>8</sup> computer database.

<sup>1</sup>Ev p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ev p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Q 6.

<sup>4</sup>Q 25.

<sup>5</sup>Appendix 13.

<sup>6</sup>See Ev p. 30.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Parliamentary On-Line Information System.

15. In addition to the many *ad hoc* enquiries from Members (see above) the Library's main work in this field is in the preparation of Research Notes, Background Papers and Reference sheets. **Research notes** have been prepared on various subjects such as computer misuse; dogs and dog registration; the ozone layer, the Montreal Protocol and beyond; the Coal Mining Subsidence Bill; and the Abortion Bill. They are usually short papers compared to the more detailed **background papers** dealing for example with Nuclear Power. **Reference sheets** are prepared to cover legislative proposals such as the Environment Protection Bill, the Food Safety Bill and the Planning and Compensation Bill.

#### *The potential for overlap*

16. The possibility of overlap between POST and the Library has been a recurring theme of our inquiry and featured repeatedly in the oral evidence.<sup>1</sup> In discussing the potential for overlap in a written submission, the Librarian said: "The range of subjects is very similar and we believe that there is a considerable potential overlap, particularly if POST's output of briefing notes was to increase".<sup>2</sup> However, in oral evidence Lord Kennett said that "there is very little overlap [between POST briefing notes and the Library's background papers and Research Notes] and that even on those rare occasions when they do overlap the treatment on each side has been rather different".<sup>3</sup>

17. On technology assessment, there is much less possibility of overlap. Indeed, the Librarian stated that the Library's "experience suggests that there is a need for technology assessment for Parliament. In its longer studies POST is able to make greater use of outside expertise and consultation than is the case for Library services. We therefore do not consider that these substantial POST reports represent an overlap with Library services".<sup>4</sup> In oral evidence, Lord Kennett argued that it was "not in the nature of the Library . . . to call in outside people . . . to sit round a table and go through a subject, still less to hold a whole day meeting of 80 or 100 people jointly with the Royal Society for the purpose of reviewing major subjects".<sup>5</sup>

18. As we stated earlier,<sup>6</sup> POST has undertaken very little select committee work, and it is therefore difficult to judge the potential for overlap in this area of POST's operations. Most select committees use the services of the Library to some extent (usually the relevant Research Division) and few of them would at present need more than the equivalent of preliminary briefing or relatively short-term work from the Library. We therefore consider that there is unlikely to be a particular problem of overlap in this area in the foreseeable future. It is of course for individual select committees to decide which sources to use to assist their inquiries.

19. Although it therefore appeared that, of the three main areas of POST's possible responsibilities, there would be a potential overlap in only one (between POST's briefing notes and the Library's research notes and background papers) we nevertheless felt it necessary to ask POST and the Librarian to discuss ways in which their provision of scientific information to Parliament could be better co-ordinated.

20. Their joint statement is in the Annex to the report.<sup>7</sup> The main provisions of the statement are to propose that the Library should be represented on the POST Board; that the Head of the Science and Environment Section of the Library and the Director of POST should liaise directly; and that POST should be represented at any relevant planning meetings of the Science and Environment Section. We considered the contents of the statement and believe that the provisions therein will provide a sensible and workable framework for the future co-ordination of scientific information for Parliament however POST is structured and funded.

#### V. FINANCIAL SITUATION

21. The Director of Finance and Administration's helpful memorandum<sup>8</sup> states that POST's cash in hand at 30 November 1991 was £162,000 which represents approximately one year's expenses. The promised funding until the end of financial year 1992-93 is some £42,000. When

<sup>1</sup>QQ 5, 6, 7, 9, 16, 17, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 46, 50.

<sup>2</sup>Appendix 3.

<sup>3</sup>Q 30.

<sup>4</sup>Appendix 3.

<sup>5</sup>Q 9.

<sup>6</sup>See para 12c above.

<sup>7</sup>See p. xiv.

<sup>8</sup>Appendix 2.

expenses for the period are deducted it is likely that POST will be "substantially out of funds"<sup>1</sup> by that date. We requested confirmation of this at the oral evidence session and asked about the possibility of keeping POST in its present form by seeking continuation of the present (outside) funding. In reply Lord Kennett stated that POST "asked for money for three years only to demonstrate [POST's] services".<sup>2</sup> Mr Jim Cousins, MP, POST's Treasurer, added that sponsors were not expecting to become "permanently responsible for funding something forever"<sup>3</sup> . . . the work of the organisation will start to run down . . . in the course of this . . . financial year".<sup>4</sup> Professor Sir Hans Kornberg, a Board member of POST, added that the trustees of the Nuffield Foundation had "decided for a limited time [to] devote funds to setting up POST" and that "there is no suggestion that the private granting agencies could continue to fund POST".<sup>5</sup> Other outside organisations confirmed this view. The Leverhulme Trust had made a "grant for a strictly limited period of three years, and . . . will not entertain a request for its extension".<sup>6</sup> The Fellowship of Engineering did not "consider it appropriate . . . to continue indefinitely this support".<sup>7</sup> The trustees of the Wellcome Trust had already considered an extension to the three-year term but had "concluded that it would be an inappropriate use of funds".<sup>8</sup>

22. It also became clear that some form of transitional funding might be required to allow POST to function throughout the period to April 1993, which appears to be the earliest date from which significant Parliamentary funding could be available.<sup>9</sup> The Director of Finance and Administration points out that "a decision on the amount of funding for the years commencing 1 April 1993, 1994 and 1995 would be desirable now because the three year plan will be prepared during March and April 1992".<sup>10</sup> Mr Rodda went on to confirm that "without some commitment from Parliament, there may be some damage to POST's continuing work before the end of March 1993."

23. POST's present annual budget is approximately £½ million. We were not able to quantify the division of funding between briefing notes and technology assessment but the total contrasts with the Science and Environment Section of the Library, which, in addition to a considerable amount of oral consultation with individual Members, has replied in writing to 1,320 enquiries during 1991, and has produced 14 research papers of which half are sharply focused on scientific subjects, at a staff cost of some £142,000.

24. In their original Memorandum POST proposed that "an appropriate level of service to start with would be between that currently provided and double that currently provided"<sup>11</sup> (that is, between £220,000 and £440,000 at 1991 prices) and favoured setting POST up as a "new and distinct parliamentary office".<sup>12</sup> They conceded however, that if this could only be achieved through primary legislation they would accept another of the options, a separate agency funded by Parliament. A third option (for part internal and part external funding) did not find favour with the POST Board.

25. The Library in their Memorandum<sup>13</sup> pointed out that the total staff costs of the Science and Environment Section were £142,306 and suggested that the addition of a "single researcher . . . to its establishment would make possible a substantial and sustained increase in output of briefing papers". While acknowledging that the Library is a cost-effective organisation, it is difficult to compare their costs with the costs of POST, and in any event much of the work undertaken is of a very different nature. Moreover this solution would not in itself address the perceived need for technology assessment which the Librarian acknowledges would be beyond the expertise and resources of the Library.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore we were told that the Library of the US Congress "had no doubts in their mind that [technology assessment] covered a different field—a rather more . . . in-depth field than the Library could".<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Q 13.

<sup>3</sup>Q 20.

<sup>4</sup>Q 22.

<sup>5</sup>Q 38.

<sup>6</sup>Appendix 4.

<sup>7</sup>Appendix 5.

<sup>8</sup>Appendix 6.

<sup>9</sup>QQ 20, 23.

<sup>10</sup>Appendix 16.

<sup>11</sup>Ev p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Ev p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>Ev p. 30.

<sup>14</sup>Ev p. 30, Appendix 3.

<sup>15</sup>Q 5.

26. The POST Board favoured the “new and distinct parliamentary office” option based primarily on comparison with other countries.<sup>1</sup> A later memorandum from POST showed that the GNP contribution of other countries to similar agencies was much higher.<sup>2</sup> The present UK GNP contribution to POST was said to be lowest at 0.4p compared with France (1.1p), USA (5.2p) and Denmark (19.3p). We do not accept that comparison with other countries can be entirely reliable, without an in-depth study of the demands, type of work and efficiency of those organisations, for which we have neither the time nor the resources at the present, but the arguments in favour of this option are, we believe, nevertheless compelling. Parliamentary independence and control, which we discuss below, will be central to the effectiveness of POST.

27. Both of the other two options proposed by POST involve a certain degree of commercial or outside funding. Although it is important to avoid unnecessary expenditure of public money, we believe that outside funding for a Parliamentary body will create problems of a potential loss of independence and (depending on the source of the money) possible commercial pressure. Sir Gerard Vaughan, MP, in oral evidence stated that POST, if publicly funded, would provide “a service for Members of Parliament quite independent from the executive, quite independent from any lobbying”<sup>3</sup> Mr Jim Cousins, MP, POST’s Treasurer, agreed that POST “should not be overly dependent upon private funding”<sup>4</sup> Sir Gerard added that it was important that POST should be “independent from outside funders”.<sup>5</sup> Any encouragement to POST to seek outside funding would therefore have to be carefully controlled and monitored. In particular, funding from commercial companies as distinct from charitable trusts or public sector organisations such as the Research Councils, might seriously damage POST’s reputation for independence and therefore run the risk of compromising the value of its services to Parliament. We also consider it important that, in establishing POST, the principles of financial control endorsed by Sir Robin Ibbs’ report on *House of Commons Services* should be taken fully into account.

28. We have carefully considered the various and competing suggestions made to us by POST and the Library. We have also considered other options contributed by the Director of Finance and Administration.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the background of support by the Services Committee and by the survey of Members and Peers, we have also considered the option of not providing public funds and causing POST either to die, or to try to find all its funds from sponsors on a continuing basis.

29. On the latter point we have concluded that 100 per cent external funding on a long-term basis might prejudice the independence of POST and would make it difficult for Parliament properly to control its operation. **We therefore consider that POST should not be 100 per cent externally funded, and agree that some form of parliamentary funding would therefore be appropriate.** This conclusion is reinforced by the recommendations of the Select Committee on House of Commons (Services) and the House of Commons Commission in July 1991, and by the widespread support for a degree of parliamentary funding amongst Members and Peers in the opinion surveys conducted last year.

30. We have concluded above that parliamentary funding of some kind would be appropriate to support the further operations of POST. Nevertheless, a number of issues—most critically the possibility of controlling overlap with the work of the Science and Environment Section of the Library of the House—remain to be resolved in practice. Our recommendations are designed to ensure that if a satisfactory resolution of this and other problems can be achieved, support from parliamentary funds for the new technology assessment agency would then continue on a permanent basis. They are also designed to ensure that the agency’s work is more clearly focused on services for Parliament which cannot easily be provided by other means.

31. **We therefore recommend:**

- (a) That POST should concentrate on technology assessment and should aim to produce briefing notes far less frequently, usually connected in some way with current POST work or in those areas on which the Library would not wish to produce a paper.

<sup>1</sup>Ev p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup>Q 13.

<sup>4</sup>Q 22.

<sup>5</sup>Q 23.

<sup>6</sup>Appendix 2 and Appendix 16.

- (b) That the Library should be encouraged to increase its work on short notes or briefings and should, subject to a satisfactory case being made to the House of Commons Commission, be allocated the additional Assistant Library Clerk which the Librarian proposed.
- (c) That if POST is requested to undertake studies by Select Committees such an expense should be borne by the House on exactly the same basis as existing external work commissioned by and undertaken on behalf of such committees by an outside body.
- (d) That POST should receive public funding for the period 1993-96 and that our successor Committee should consider each year and in detail the performance of POST taking such oral evidence as necessary.
- (e) That the short-term public funding proposed should meet only the salaries of the Director, a secretary and three Scientists, together with usual administration costs. The costs of accommodation (if possible within the Parliamentary estate), heat and light, telephones, etc., for these staff should also be met from public funds as for the occupants of the Parliamentary estate. We estimate the salary and administration costs to be of the order of £170,000 per annum. Even with the reduced workload on briefing notes which we propose, this level of funding would probably not allow POST to expand their operations but would, we hope, allow them to prove the worth of technology assessment during the period. It would also, of course, be open to them to continue to ask their existing good contacts in the scientific world to contribute to their studies.

## VI. STRUCTURE OF POST AND PARLIAMENTARY CONTROL

32. The structure of the POST Board is set out in the Annex to POST's memorandum.<sup>1</sup> Concern was expressed during our inquiry at the possible lack of Parliamentary control of POST's activities. In reply to our questioning Dr Norton, the Director of POST, explained that it was important in considering technology assessment "to draw a distinction between responsive and anticipatory work . . . to try and foresee the effects of technological change and describe them to the legislature".<sup>2</sup> If, as we have recommended, POST is to pursue technology assessment as its main area of operation it will be necessary for the POST Board to take the decisions on which subjects should have priority. It will also be important that the Board should be receptive to the views of individual Members of both Houses.

33. We therefore **recommend** that the voting members of the Board should be composed exclusively of Parliamentarians (divided between Commons and Lords and reflecting the relative financial commitment of the two Houses) and should be advised by the Director and by nominees of the Librarians of both Houses as non-voting Members of the Board and by four non-voting members comprising appropriate representatives of the scientific disciplines. We would hope that the detailed arrangements for the composition of the POST Board (including the size of the Board, the numbers from each House and the selection process for voting and non-voting members) will be considered in due course by our successor Committee and its opposite numbers in the Lords.

34. The Director of Finance and Administration suggested that the POST core staff should "for management purposes [be] located within the Clerk's Department".<sup>3</sup> We consider however that this is an internal management decision which should be made by the Board of Management. The grading of the POST staff should be subject to the staff inspection procedures, to approval by the House of Commons Commission, and to consultation with the equivalent organisations in the House of Lords.

35. We refer above<sup>4</sup> to the Westminster Fellowship scheme developed by the POST Board. We **recommend** the continuation of the scheme which should as far as possible be financed from POST's publicly funded resources. If outside financial support for such fellowships is required it should be from independent sources with no commercial interest in the subject matter of the fellowship.

<sup>1</sup>Ev p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Q 17.

<sup>3</sup>Appendix 16.

<sup>4</sup>Para 12d.

## VII. HOUSE OF LORDS

36. We are most grateful for the Memorandum submitted by the Lords Science and Technology Committee.<sup>1</sup> We are aware that a parallel inquiry has been undertaken by that Committee and by the House of Lords Library and Computer Sub-Committee. We have maintained contact informally throughout and hope that our recommendations will find favour with their Lordships.

37. If both Houses agree to fund POST, the question of the division of funding arises. The normal arrangement is for 78 per cent of funding for joint projects to be met by the Commons, the remaining 22 per cent by the Lords. We have not been able to estimate the likely usage of POST's services but would hope that our successor Committee in consultation with the Director would be in a better position to assess the relative demands placed on POST by each House. For the present however, we are content to accept the normal 78:22 split.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

38. The recommendations set out above are designed to provide the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology with a further proving period under parliamentary auspices, following the initial trial under outside sponsorship. The results of the Members' opinion survey carried out last year demonstrated that there is substantial support in principle in the House (and, indeed, in the House of Lords) for the provision of a technology assessment service. The output of POST in its original guise has been widely commended in the scientific community as of high quality, and many Members (and Peers) commented in their replies to the survey on the value which they attached to the receipt of scientific and technological advice of this kind.

39. It seems to us to be self-evident that if Parliament requires a service of this kind, it is for Parliament to pay for it. It would be in our view wholly inappropriate for the national parliament to rely indefinitely on charitable funding for a service which it requires, and since the charitable organisations concerned could not be expected to provide funding on an open-ended basis, any alternative form of external funding would in any case probably involve sponsorship (if it could be secured at all) of an overtly commercial character. Such a development would put the independence and integrity of the technological assessment organisation at risk. It would, moreover, be somewhat ironic if the House were to agree to depend on outside funding for a service of this kind at precisely the time when, as result of the implementation of Sir Robin Ibbs' Report on House of Commons Services, it is for the first time taking direct control over the provision of all other common services.

40. We have therefore recommended that during the next Parliament resources should be provided from public funds on a scale broadly comparable with those already available and that any expansion of public funding should be related wholly and directly to the perceived value of technology assessment to the Members and Committees of both Houses.

## IX. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### 41. We recommend that

- (i) the provisions in the joint Statement<sup>2</sup> submitted by POST and the Library be adopted, in order to provide a sensible and workable framework for the future co-ordination of scientific information for Parliament however POST is structured and funded. (para 20)
- (ii) POST should not be 100 per cent externally funded, and agree that some form of parliamentary funding would therefore be appropriate. (para 29)
- (iii) POST should concentrate on technology assessment and should aim to produce briefing notes far less frequently, usually connected in some way with current POST work or in those areas on which the Library would not wish to produce a paper. (para 31a)
- (iv) the Library should be encouraged to increase its work on short notes or briefings and should, subject to a satisfactory case being made to the House of Commons Commission, be allocated the additional Assistant Library Clerk which the Librarian proposed. (para 31b)

<sup>1</sup>Appendix 14.

<sup>2</sup>See Annex to the Report p. xiv.

- (v) if POST is requested to undertake studies by Select Committees such an expense should be borne by the House on exactly the same basis as existing external work commissioned by and undertaken on behalf of such committees by an outside body. (para 31c)
- (vi) POST should receive public funding for the period 1993-96 and that our successor Committee should consider each year and in detail the performance of POST, taking such oral evidence as necessary. (para 31d)
- (vii) the short-term public funding proposed should meet only the salaries of the Director, a secretary and three Scientists, together with usual administration costs. The costs of accommodation (if possible within the Parliamentary estate), heat and light, telephones etc., for these staff should also be met from public funds as for the occupants of the Parliamentary estate. We estimate the salary and administration costs to be of the order of £170,000 per annum. Even with the reduced workload on briefing notes which we propose, this level of funding would probably not allow POST to expand their operations but would, we hope, allow them to prove the worth of technology assessment during the period. It would also, of course, be open to them to continue to ask their existing good contacts in the scientific world to contribute to their studies. (para 31e)
- (viii) the voting members of the POST Board should be composed exclusively of Parliamentarians (divided between Commons and Lords and reflecting the relative financial commitment of the two Houses) and should be advised by the Director and by nominees of the Librarians of both Houses as non-voting Members of the Board and by four non-voting members comprising appropriate representatives of the scientific disciplines. We would hope that the detailed arrangements for the composition of the POST Board (including the size of the Board, the numbers from each House and the selection process for voting and non-voting members) will be considered in due course by our successor Committee and its opposite numbers in the Lords. (para 33)
- (ix) the grading of the POST staff should be subject to the staff inspection procedures, to approval by the House of Commons Commission, and to consultation with the equivalent organisations in the House of Lords. (para 34)
- (x) the Westminster Fellowships scheme should be continued and should as far as possible be financed from POST's publicly funded resources. If outside financial support for such fellowships is required it should be from independent sources with no commercial interest in the subject matter of the fellowship. (para 35)
- (xi) if both Houses agree to fund POST, the normal arrangement of 78 per cent of funding for joint projects to be met by the Commons, the remaining 22 per cent by the Lords should apply. We have not been able to estimate the likely usage of POST's services but would hope that our successor Committee in consultation with the Director would be in a better position to assess the relative demands placed on POST by each House. (para 37)

## ANNEX

*Joint Statement by the Library of the House of Commons and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) on services of scientific information to Parliament. (INF 27)*

In the event of Parliamentary Funds being made available for POST it will be necessary to have clear terms of reference for both the Science and Environment Section in the Research Division of the Library Department of the House of Commons and for POST.

A. The Science and Environment Section should continue to have the terms of reference of other Research Division Sections namely:

- (1) To answer specific questions placed by Members or on their behalf by their personal staff. All replies are sent in confidence to the Member personally.
- (2) To prepare Background Papers, Reference Sheets and Research Notes as appropriate on legislation and on subjects of scientific interest to Parliament.
- (3) To respond to requests for information from Select Committees if asked.
- (4) To assemble and maintain a scientific library appropriate to the needs of 1-3 above and to use external sources of information whenever necessary to complement its own resources.

B. POST has provided a science and technology assessment service to Parliament since 1989. Initially this comprised only short briefings on science and technology-based issues; increasingly, POST's primary activity has been the conduct of technology assessments on subjects agreed by the POST Board. It is accepted by both parties that the latter activity is not an area of potential overlap with Library services. Nevertheless, as part of its technology assessment work, POST would continue to prepare short papers on the science and technology giving rise to policy issues of interest to Members.

C. It is proposed that in order to ensure that these papers do not overlap with point 2 of the work of the Science and Environment Section and vice versa:

- (1) The Library should be represented on the Board of POST.
- (2) The Head of the Science and Environment Section and the Director of POST should liaise directly to ensure effective communication and co-ordination.
- (3) POST should be represented at any relevant planning meetings of the Science and Environment Section.

Should the Library identify any area where they believe a technological assessment would be of help to Members (on the basis of their regular close work with individual Members) then the Head of the Science and Environment Section would draw the matter to the attention of the Director of POST, and should POST identify any area which they believe would be suitable for a Library Research Briefing, then the Director of POST would draw the matter to the attention of the Science and Environment Section of the Library.

D. The Science and Environment Section would continue to report to the Information Committee via the Librarian. It is assumed similar arrangements would be made for POST. The Information Committee may wish to review the above arrangements after an appropriate interval (e.g., 2-3 years).

February 1992

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE RELATING TO THE REPORT

TUESDAY, 3 MARCH, 1992

Members present:

Sir Fergus Montgomery, in the Chair

|                     |                |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Mr Spencer Batiste  | Mr John McFall |
| Mr Andrew F Bennett | Mr Gary Waller |
| Sir Ian Lloyd       |                |

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report, proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Draft Report, proposed by Mr Andrew F Bennett, brought up and read, as follows:

**Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology**

## INTRODUCTION

The Information Committee was asked by the House of Commons to consider the future of POST, its funding and its accountability to the House. This is clearly a complex matter. Unfortunately, some members of the committee felt that a decision had to be rushed through before the election, even though detailed scrutiny was at a very early stage. It was also unlikely that the Finance Committee would be able to consider the report before the election and certainly not desirable to commit a future Parliament without a very clear plan for it over at least five years. It was also clear that, since POST's funding was secure until March 1993, there was no need for such a rush other than to try to commit a new Parliament before it knew fully what was involved.

## HISTORY

POST was clearly supported by a coalition of interests which felt that Parliament did not take enough interest in Science and Technology. When it did, it was ill-informed. It was felt that the Government did not provide enough resources for Science and Technology and that a Parliamentary lobby was needed. It was also felt that the demise of the old Science and Technology Select Committee had been a disaster and the promise that subjects would be provided with adequate cover through the departmental select committees had not materialised. Some were also dissatisfied with the service provided by the Library where Science and Technology were concerned. It was pointed out that other parliaments had their own versions of POST and that it was natural that Britain should have one too. Since the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher refused POST funding, money was then raised from outside sources to try to prove its worth.

Perhaps because of the diversity of ideas which gave rise to its birth or the feeling that it had to prove the worth of its existence, much of POST's early work concentrated upon short briefing papers for members of the All-Party Science and Technology Group. It is claimed that these papers are popular with Members and even more so outside. The evidence of Members' support is based on a questionnaire, which did not actually address the issue of whether POST was worth its costs compared to other causes in need of money. Not surprisingly, Members like it—just as most people approve of *kindness*. The committee heard evidence that these short notes could be prepared at a much lower cost and without duplication if prepared by the Science and Technology section of the Library.

It was also intended that POST should provide assistance to existing departmental select committees. This has not really happened. Clearly, committees have preferred to use their own expert advisers without turning to POST. The committees have the power to commission and directly pay for research, but have not done so in scientific areas. POST has carried out three longer term Science and Technology assessments that do appear to be impressive, although no-one has explained why such work ought to be done by the House of Commons rather than by the Research Councils and/or an academic institution or a specialist group.

Finally, because POST has been funded from outside, it has not been fitted into the House of Commons structure in terms of management and control.

## FUTURE

(A) POST should not produce short information notes since, for far less money, the Library could do at least as good a job. The Library also has a considerable resource of material which has to be kept up to date for the rest of its Science and Technology work. Equally, the Library has a tried and trusted system for responding to requests from Members for information. **If any money is available, we recommend that the first call on it should be to increase the Library's strengths by at least two posts in a Science and Technology research section.**

(B) POST has no role to play in servicing the present departmental committees. We believe that their method of seeking expert advice is perfectly adequate. Indeed, the Health and Social Services Committee has demonstrated that research can effectively be commissioned. We regret that other departmental committees have not chosen to commission outside work and that the research budget has not been fully used. However, we believe there is a clearly defined way by which select committees can obtain expert advice and research and we see no role for POST here.

(C) The Labour Party science policy envisages the re-establishment of the pre-1980 Science and Technology Select Committee. We recognise that, in spite of promises made in 1980, the present departmental committees have not fulfilled *all* the roles of that old committee. POST would be well placed to carry out longer Science and Technology assessment projects for such a committee. Even so, the structure of POST would most logically be similar to other organisations servicing other select committees.

(D) If this were not done, POST could be established as a free standing organisation, accountable to the Information and Technology Committee of the House of Commons, just as the Library is. Alternatively, it could be established as a section of the Library.

The advantages and disadvantages of each approach come down to how much money is available and how much POST needs to do an effective job.

On this issue, the information available to the committee was totally inadequate. POST has operated with a budget of £ $\frac{1}{4}$  million per year, because that was what was available from the sponsors. No figures were available as to how much of the money was used for short briefing papers and as to how much long-term scientific assessments actually cost. Herein lies the crux of the problem. In other countries where equivalents to POST exist, resources are many times larger. It is not clear whether POST could do high quality scientific and technological assessment research in major fields with a budget of £ $\frac{1}{4}$  million. It could do so in specified fields, but it is questionable whether this is a role which best fits Parliament rather than Research Councils.

(E) The Ibbs Report was very critical of the House of Commons for not having clear executive control, clear lines of command or precise accountability to Members. The new House Committees were designed to overcome this problem. It would be a mistake to rush into the establishment of POST on an *ad hoc* basis in total contradiction of Ibbs' advice.

## CONCLUSION

**We recommend that the first priority is to establish where Members' priorities lie for the expenditure of extra resources on the running of Parliament, and whether in such arguments for extra resources MP's want POST. How important do Members see POST compared with better research facilities for themselves, improved offices and equipment and enhanced Library facilities?**

We need to establish whether at £ $\frac{1}{4}$  million per annum for the next four years, POST could do a job done in other countries for much larger sums of money. If this is not the case, is it worth having a job half-done just so we can say we theoretically have the same facilities as abroad?

Thirdly, although we recommend a new Parliament establishes a Science and Technology Select Committee, we need to wait until it is established in order to sort out an accountability structure for POST.

For these reasons, we believe that this Report is premature and the Finance Committee ought to ask us to pursue the matter again after the election.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.—(*The Chairman.*)

Amendment proposed, to leave out the words "Chairman's draft Report" and insert the words "draft Report proposed by Mr Andrew F Bennett".—(*Mr Andrew F Bennett.*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 1  
Mr Andrew F Bennett

Noes, 3  
Mr Spencer Batiste  
Sir Ian Lloyd  
Mr Gary Waller

Main question put and agreed to.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraph 1 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 2 read, amended, and agreed to.

Paragraph 3 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 4 read, amended, and agreed to.

Paragraphs 5 and 6 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 7 read, amended, and agreed to.

Paragraphs 8 and 9 read and agreed to.

A paragraph—(*Mr John McFall*)—brought up, read the first and second time, amended and inserted (as paragraph 10).

Paragraph 10 (now paragraph 11) read and agreed to.

Paragraphs 11 and 12 (now paragraphs 12 and 13) read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 13 to 21 (now paragraphs 14 to 22) read and agreed to.

Another paragraph—(*Mr John McFall*)—brought up, read the first and second time, amended and inserted (as paragraph 23).

Another paragraph—(*Mr John McFall*)—brought up, and read, as follows:

A comparison with the Treasury macroeconomic model which dated back to the Industry Act 1975 would not be inappropriate. This example illustrates the danger in establishing an *ad hoc* arrangement before terms of reference, reporting back mechanisms and financial accountability to Parliament is detailed. The cost of the model initially varied but was always less than £10,000 per annum. In 1985, the operation was transferred to the University of Warwick at a cost of £70,000 per year which included two permanently employed staff. In 1987 an inquiry by the Computer Sub-Committee of the Services Committee recommended terminating the scheme. The current arrangement, with access by the House of Commons Library to the Treasury model involves an annual cost in 1992 of only £17,625.

Question put, That the paragraph be read a second time.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2  
Mr Andrew F Bennett  
Mr John McFall

Noes, 3  
Mr Spencer Batiste  
Sir Ian Lloyd  
Mr Gary Waller

Paragraphs 22 to 24 (now paragraphs 24 to 26) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 25 (now paragraph 27) read, amended, and agreed to.

Paragraphs 26 and 27 (now paragraphs 28 and 29) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 28 (now 30) read, as follows:

Although we have concluded above that parliamentary funding of some kind would be appropriate to support the further operations of POST, the evidence so far received does not convince us that a case has yet been made for the provision of such funding on a permanent and open-ended basis. A number of issues—most critically the possibility of controlling overlap with the work of the Science and Environment Section of the Library of the House—remain to be resolved in practice. Our recommendations are designed to ensure that if a satisfactory resolution of this and other problems cannot be achieved in the reasonably near future any support from parliamentary funds for the new technology assessment agency would be of a short-term nature. They are also designed to ensure that the agency's work is more clearly focused on services for Parliament which cannot easily be provided by other means.

Amendments made.

Another Amendment proposed, in line 8, to leave out the words "be of a short-term nature" and insert the words "then continue on a permanent basis".—(*Sir Ian Lloyd*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

|                     |                |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Ayes, 3             | Noes, 2        |
| Mr Spencer Batiste  | Mr John McFall |
| Mr Andrew F Bennett | Mr Gary Waller |
| Sir Ian Lloyd       |                |

Paragraph 29 (now 31) read, as follows:

We therefore recommend:

- (a) That POST should concentrate on technology assessment and should aim to produce briefing notes far less frequently, usually connected in some way with current POST work or in those areas on which the Library would not wish to produce a paper.
- (b) That the Library should be encouraged to increase its work on short notes or briefings and should, subject to a satisfactory case being made to the House of Commons Commission, be allocated the additional Assistant Library Clerk which the Librarian proposed.
- (c) That POST should charge for any substantial studies undertaken at the request of select committees of either House. This would enable POST to "bid" for such work and would enable committees to decide whether to commission the work from POST or an outside body.
- (d) That POST should receive public funding for a further experimental period (from April 1993-96 inclusive), that our successor Committee should consider the performance of POST each year and should report to the House, not later than March 1995, their assessment of POST's effectiveness and any conclusions they may have reached on the desirability, or otherwise, of continued parliamentary funding.
- (e) That the short-term public funding proposed should meet only the salaries of the Director, a secretary and three Scientists, together with usual administration costs. The costs of accommodation (if possible within the Parliamentary estate), heat and light, telephones, etc., for these staff should also be met from public funds as for the occupants of the Parliamentary estate. We estimate the salary and administration costs to be of the order of £170,000 per annum. Even with the reduced workload on briefing notes which we propose, this level of funding would probably not allow POST to expand their operations but would, we hope, allow them to prove the worth of technology assessment during the experimental period. It would also, of course, be open to them to continue to ask their existing good contacts in the scientific world to contribute to their studies.

Amendments made.

Another Amendment proposed, in line 12, to leave out the words "a further experimental period (from April 1993-96 inclusive)" and insert the words "the period 1993-96".—(*Sir Ian Lloyd*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

|                     |                |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Ayes, 3             | Noes, 2        |
| Mr Spencer Batiste  | Mr John McFall |
| Mr Andrew F Bennett | Mr Gary Waller |
| Sir Ian Lloyd       |                |

Other Amendments made

Paragraph, as amended, agreed to.

Paragraph 30 (now paragraph 32) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 31 (now paragraph 33) read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 32 read, as follows:

We further recommend that there should be a non-Parliamentary advisory committee, reporting to the new Board and the Director. The Committee would be comprised of appropriate representatives of the scientific disciplines and would be nominated by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. This advisory committee would be expected to provide authoritative specialist advice to the new Board, but it would have no executive powers.

Paragraph disagreed to.

Paragraph 33 (now paragraph 34) read, as follows:

The Director of Finance and Administration suggested that the POST core staff should “for management purposes [be] located within the Clerk’s Department”. We consider however that this is an internal management decision which should be made by the Board of Management. The grading of the POST staff should be subject to the staff inspection procedures, to approval by the House of Commons Commission, and to consultation with the equivalent organisations in the House of Lords.

An Amendment proposed, to add the words “Furthermore, we would assume that the grading of POST’s staff would reflect those which already exist in the Library where the Head of Research is at Grade 5, while the Head of a Research Section such as the Science and Environment Section is at Grade 6”.—(Mr John McFall).

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

|                |                     |
|----------------|---------------------|
| Ayes, 1        | Noes, 4             |
| Mr John McFall | Mr Spencer Batiste  |
|                | Mr Andrew F Bennett |
|                | Sir Ian Lloyd       |
|                | Mr Garry Waller     |

A paragraph—(Mr Andrew F Bennett)—brought up, read the first and second time and inserted (as paragraph 35).

Paragraphs 34 to 37 (now paragraphs 36 to 39) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 38 read, as follows:

Despite the expressions of support for POST’s work amongst Members, however, its full value to Parliament has not yet been fully proved. In particular, its contribution to the work of the select committees of either House has so far been at best embryonic, and it is perfectly reasonable to argue that such work as has been carried out in this area might equally well have been provided on an *ad hoc* basis by the Research Councils, university or polytechnic departments, or individually-appointed specialist advisers. It is also clear that much of the day-to-day work of POST to date (as in the area of briefing notes) might have been provided through some enhancement of the resources of the Library of the House.

Paragraph disagreed to.

Paragraph 39 read, as follows:

For all these reasons, our recommendations tend towards the cautious. We believe that a further period needs to be provided for a technology assessment agency of this kind to prove its full worth to Parliament. We believe that the control of such an agency by a **parliamentary**, rather than a predominantly scientific, management body also needs to be tested in practice. And we believe that POST's work should be concentrated, during this further trial period, on services which cannot be easily accommodated by the existing services of the Library.

Question put, That the paragraph stand part of the Report.

The Committee divided.

|                |                     |
|----------------|---------------------|
| Ayes, 2        | Noes, 3             |
| Mr John McFall | Mr Spencer Batiste  |
| Mr Gary Waller | Mr Andrew F Bennett |
|                | Sir Ian Lloyd       |

Another paragraph—(*Sir Ian Lloyd*)—brought up, read the first and second time and inserted (now paragraph 40).

Paragraph 40 read, as follows:

We have therefore recommended a further short trial period with resources no greater than those provided during the last three years. It would be wholly premature to accede at this stage to the wishes of the present POST Board for any substantial increase in the overall financial commitment to POST unless or until the organisation's value to Parliament in a more narrowly defined field is fully demonstrated.

Question put, that the paragraph stand part of the Report.

The Committee divided.

|                |                     |
|----------------|---------------------|
| Ayes, 1        | Noes, 4             |
| Mr John McFall | Mr Spencer Batiste  |
|                | Mr Andrew F Bennett |
|                | Sir Ian Lloyd       |
|                | Mr Gary Waller      |

Paragraph 41 read, as follows:

We believe that a further experimental period on the lines suggested will be worthwhile, particularly since the United Kingdom Parliament cannot simply turn its back on new sources of advice and information which are claimed to have made a significant contribution to the work of similar parliaments elsewhere. The United Kingdom Parliament has no cause for pride in its ability to handle scientific and technological issues, and an outright rejection of the services of a technology assessment agency might be regarded as more than a little complacent.

Amendment proposed, in line 1, to leave out the word "experimental".—(*Sir Ian Lloyd*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

|                     |                |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Ayes, 4             | Noes, 1        |
| Mr Spencer Batiste  | Mr John McFall |
| Mr Andrew F Bennett |                |
| Sir Ian Lloyd       |                |
| Mr Gary Waller      |                |

Question put, That the paragraph, as amended, stand part of the Report.

The Committee divided.

|                |                     |
|----------------|---------------------|
| Ayes, 1        | Noes, 4             |
| Mr John McFall | Mr Spencer Batiste  |
|                | Mr Andrew F Bennett |
|                | Sir Ian Lloyd       |
|                | Mr Gary Waller      |

Paragraph 42 read, as follows:

But we are agnostic about the final outcome. It is very much for the proponents of POST to ensure that it can sufficiently demonstrate its work to Parliament in order to secure its establishment as a permanent service for the two Houses. If there is not convincing evidence that this is being achieved, we would expect our successor Committee to recommend that the experiment should not be continued. We hope that this will not be the outcome, but it is more realistic to recognise at this stage that it is more than a marginal possibility.

Question put, that the paragraph stand part of the report.

The Committee divided

|                |                     |
|----------------|---------------------|
| Ayes, 1        | Noes, 4             |
| Mr John McFall | Mr Spencer Batiste  |
|                | Mr Andrew F Bennett |
|                | Sir Ian Lloyd       |
|                | Mr Gary Waller      |

Paragraph 43 (now paragragh 41) read and agreed to.

*Ordered*, That the Joint Memorandum submitted by POST and the Library (INF/27) be annexed to the Report.—(*The Chairman*).

*Resolved*, That the Report, as amended, be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That the provisions of SO No. 116 (Select Committees (reports)) be applied to the Report.

Several papers were ordered to be appended to the Minutes of Evidence.

*Ordered*, That the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee together with the Appendices be reported to the House.—(*The Chairman*).

The Committee deliberated.

[Adjourned to a day and time to be fixed by the Chairman.]

## LIST OF WITNESSES

Session 1991-92

Monday 27 January 1902

|   |    |
|---|----|
| PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (POST):<br>Lord Kennet, Sir Gerard Vaughan, MP, Mr Jim Cousins, MP,<br>Professor Sir Hans Kornberg, FRS, and Dr M Norton | 18 |
| HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY:<br>Mr Dermot Englefield, Mr Chris Barclay and Ms N Donlon   | 32 |

LIST OF MEMORANDA INCLUDED  
IN THE MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

## LIST OF APPENDICES TO THE MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

## Appendix

| No. | <i>Memorandum submitted by</i>  | Page |
|-----|---|------|
| 1.  | Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (INF/24)                                 | 38   |
| 2.  | Director of Finance and Administration, House of Commons (INF/26)                       | 40   |
| 3.  | Librarian, House of Commons (INF/15)  | 42   |
| 4.  | The Leverhulme Trust (INF/10)   | 43   |
| 5.  | The Fellowship of Engineering (INF/11)  | 44   |
| 6.  | The Wellcome Trust (INF/12)   | 45   |
| 7.  | Science and Engineering Research Council (INF/13)                                       | 46   |
| 8.  | Natural Environment Research Council (INF/14)   | 47   |
| 9.  | The Nuffield Foundation (INF/16)  | 48   |
| 10. | Economic and Social Research Council (INF/17)   | 48   |
| 11. | The Royal Society (INF/22)  | 49   |
| 12. | Agricultural and Food Research Council (INF/25)   | 50   |
| 13. | Education, Science and Arts Committee,<br>Science and Technology Sub-Committee (INF/28) | 51   |
| 14. | House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology (INF/29)                      | 51   |
| 15. | Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (INF/32)                                 | 53   |
| 16. | Director of Finance and Administration, House of Commons (INF/33)                       | 55   |
| 17. | Medical Research Council (INF/34)   | 56   |
| 18. | Librarian, House of Commons (INF/36)  | 56   |

# MINUTES OF EVIDENCE TAKEN BEFORE THE INFORMATION COMMITTEE

MONDAY 27 JANUARY 1992

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## Members present:

Sir Fergus Montgomery, in the Chair

|                     |                |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Mr Spencer Batiste  | Mr John McFall |
| Mr Andrew F Bennett | Mr Gary Waller |
| Sir Ian Lloyd       |                |

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## Memorandum submitted to the Information Committee by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) (INF/4)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The House of Commons Commission discussed at its meeting on 24 July 1991 a resolution from the Services Committee concerning parliamentary funding of POST.

The Commission noted that there was clear support from Members for the availability of services of the kind offered by POST. They felt, however, that the likely level of use of such services was rather less clear, and that the future level of service required, and the kind of financing arrangement which would be desirable, needed further and careful examination. The Commission were particularly conscious of the need to ensure that any new services provided from public funds should complement, rather than duplicate, those already available through the Library's Science and Environment section.

In view of these considerations, the Commission agreed that the new Information Committee, to be set up as part of the Ibbs reforms at the start of the 1991-92 Session, should be invited to consider the nature of the service which might be provided by POST in the future, the co-ordination of such a service with those already provided by the Library, and the financial needs of POST.

This paper has been prepared by the POST Board in order to provide the Committee with relevant background information and facilitate consideration of questions raised by the Commission concerning parliamentary support of POST.

### 2. THE PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

#### 2.1 *Background*

During the early 1980s a number of MPs and Peers concluded that there were an increasing number of issues of policy which Members of both Houses are asked to address which arise from the role of science and technology in our society. They saw an increasing need to provide Parliament with an organisation which would undertake an impartial assessment of the scientific and/or technological background to such issues. They were impressed by the record and work of the US Congress's Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) and similar initiatives being undertaken in a number of European countries.

The issue was put by a delegation led by Sir Ian Lloyd to Mrs Thatcher in 1986. The then Prime Minister discouraged the idea of support from public funds, but suggested that an initiative might be taken by the all-party Parliamentary and Scientific Committee with non-governmental support. This Committee provides Members of both Houses, and scientists and industrialists with an opportunity to meet regularly and discuss issues of common interest. But it had (and still has) limited resources and has never carried out any work comparable to that undertaken by the OTA and similar organisations.

Under the chairmanship of Sir Trevor Skeet, the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee accepted the Prime Minister's suggestion and decided to set up the Parliamentary Science and Technology Information Foundation (PSTIF) as a charity. A number of approaches were made by Sir Ian Lloyd, Sir Trevor Skeet, Sir Gerard Vaughan, Lord Gregson and Lord Kennet (amongst others) to potential sponsors and sufficient funds were raised to proceed with the establishment of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology which commenced operations in April 1989. POST's initial and subsequent sponsors have been large technology-based companies, institutions (including the Royal Society and the Fellowship of Engineering) and charitable foundations such as the Nuffield Foundation, and the Gatsby, Wellcome and Leverhulme Trusts. Among POST's individual sponsors are Members of both Houses of Parliament.

The support of the vast majority of these sponsors (See Annex 1) was given on the basis of providing the UK Parliament with a demonstration project to run for 3-4 years, so that parliament would be better placed to decide whether to make provision for such a service on a longer-term basis.

27 January 1992]

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## 2.2 POST's Structure

The structure adopted by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee for POST is shown in **Figure 1**. The PSTIF, with five trustees appointed at the AGM of the PSC, provides the means of supporting the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (**Figure 2**). POST is headed by a Director responsible to a Board, which consists of Parliamentarians from both Houses and from all parties, together with distinguished scientists and technologists representing a wide range of scientific and engineering disciplines. The Board determines POST's tasks and reviews all its publications before they are released to Parliament (See **Figure 3**). Those currently involved as Trustees and Board members are listed in **Annex 2**.

## 2.3 POST's Services

The Board has directed POST's activities to complement and not duplicate other Parliamentary information resources, particularly the Libraries and Select Committees. The particular characteristics of POST's work are:

- (a) Subjects are selected by a cross-party consensus according to utility and relevance.
- (b) No departmental or disciplinary boundaries are imposed on the work.
- (c) POST makes extensive use of scientific and technological resources outside Parliament through consultation, provision of information and review.

From the outset (April 1989) the POST Board decided to help **MPs and Peers** to become better informed on key issues involving science and technology through the provision of Briefing Notes. These may contribute to informed debate or identify issues that can be followed up by the Member through questions or administrative action. Information may also assist in responding to an MP's constituency concerns.

Briefing Notes are issued approximately every three weeks during the Parliamentary session. Subjects are selected by the Board and cover a science and technology related issue relevant to the Parliamentary agenda. Some (e.g., human embryology, British Technology Group, computer misuse) relate directly to primary legislation being discussed within the Commons or the Lords. Others cover subjects which excite Parliamentary interest relating to government policies (e.g., energy efficiency, National Curriculum and A-level Sciences, BSE and slow viruses, Global Warming). In some cases, the subject is selected because it raises issues which may warrant Parliamentary attention in the future (e.g., implications of research into the Human Genome, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, Safety Critical Technology).

The preparation of briefing notes relies heavily on the network of expertise which exists through the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee and many of the Committee's members have contributed information or provided peer review for the notes (See **Figure 3**).

As already mentioned this service does not duplicate the Libraries' service to individual members. Thus even though subjects may be suggested by individual Members, POST only carries out work if the Board considers the issue is of potential interest to Parliament as a whole. Because of limited funds, direct circulation of Briefing Notes has had to be restricted to Parliamentary members of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee; extra copies are made available in the Commons and Lords Libraries. A full list of titles is at **Annex 3**.

POST's working relationship with **Select Committees** is still evolving. Three mechanisms have been shown to assist Committees on a demonstration basis. These are:

- (a) Short briefings on issues to help a Committee select between a number of options for its future programme (the briefing on High-Definition TV was in part to help the Lords Science and Technology Committee decide whether to review the issue).
- (b) Briefings to a Committee during the course of an enquiry to help sort out problems of evidence that arise (e.g., the briefing on the fate of bacteria and viruses in sea water during the Environment Committee's enquiry into Pollution of Beaches).
- (c) "Technology Assessments" where an exhaustive analysis of an issue is carried out by POST and possible policy options identified, which can then form the basis for a Select Committee enquiry (e.g., the POST report on Technologies for Teaching was followed up by the Education Select Committee enquiry into Information Technology in Schools).

It is worth noting at this point that technology assessments like (c) above are the primary, in most cases the only, product of the technology assessment agencies abroad (see later section for details of other countries' organisations and for a fuller description of technology assessment).

27 January 1992]

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### 2.3.1 Technology Assessment

The concept of technology assessment to assist the legislature has evolved out of a recognition that increasing numbers of issues in a modern society arise from or involve science and technology (e.g., in wealth creation, health services, public and environmental safety, defence and other fields). Yet dealing with issues involving Science and Technology is not straightforward.

There are matters of fact to establish, differing views often exist as to the current and future state of knowledge, and there is often widespread disagreement among experts as well as laymen on the interpretation or significance of given scientific findings. A legislature may be ill-equipped to form its own views on such complex subjects, and may leave such matters to be resolved administratively by default, without the full airing the issue may justify.

To remedy this perceived weakness, many legislatures have turned to technology assessments. What exactly is technology assessment?

TA was essentially borne out of the widespread recognition that the advance of technology often carried with it unforeseen social effects which required attention by the Legislature. The environmental side-effects of major technologies during the sixties and seventies were the backdrop to a more specific focusing of concern in the US on specific high technology projects, such as the supersonic transport and its possible effects on the ozone layer, the technical and environmental feasibility of major works such as the trans-Alaska pipeline, and the development of hi-tech defence systems typified by moves to anti-ballistic missile systems. Technology Assessment helps to assess properly the role of technology in both solving and creating problems in society. Very much in supporters' minds was the need to provide an appraisal and early warning system for both positive and negative effects of the applications of technology, and to develop analyses which would assist the decision-making process, to maximise benefits for, and to avoid adverse impacts on society at large.

An important function of TA is to analyse and if possible resolve the widespread differences of view on major science-based issues. It can be very difficult to disentangle the complex scientific disagreements over such issues as the safety of radioactive waste disposal and research into new forms of energy, since these excite major differences of view, and emotion, amongst participants in the debate. A useful role is thus seen for TA in boiling down these debates to key issues expressed in terms with which most law-makers are familiar, expressing all points in the debate with neutral clarity.

Over the last 20 years since the first agency (the US Office of Technology Assessment) started however, the concept of technology assessment has expanded to encompass the objective analysis of any major issue raised by scientific and technological change. Since most areas of society are affected by technological change, this definition has in effect expanded the potential role of technology assessment from fairly narrow fields of science and technology to technological issues arising in all major sectors of society—transport, defence, the economy, education and training, energy, health, etc.

The process of technology assessment is to mobilise the relevant expertise available in society to examine different views on a given subject, and to analyse rationally the future impact of current policies and their alternatives. In this way the technology assessment not only includes much factual material, but also logical extrapolations of different policy options. Technology assessments are subject to extensive quality control through peer review, and deliberately set out to involve the "stake-holders" in an issue (i.e., all those with interests in the issue). For these reasons, technology assessments catalyse the co-operation of many different communities (pressure groups, industry, professional groups) and tend to have as much of an impact outside the legislature as within it.

### 2.4 Resources and Budget

POST's core staff comprises only a Director and personal secretary, but it has been possible to expand the available resources through a series of Westminster Fellowships. These take two forms:

- Short secondments from universities, government departments, industry, etc., whose incidental costs are funded through the Royal Society/Royal Institution/British Association's Committee on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS). It is also possible that secondments from Research Councils will be introduced.
- Fully funded two or three year Fellowships supported by specific charities. These are the Wellcome Fellowship (three years from April 1990), the Leverhulme Fellowship (three years from September 1990), and the Esso/Dulverton Trust Fellowship (two years from October 1991).

27 January 1992]

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TABLE 1  
*Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology: Budget 1989-93*

|  | 1989          | 1990           | 1991           | 1992           | 1993              |
|--|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| <i>A. Core Budget:</i>   |               |                |                |                |                   |
| Accommodation Costs  | 5,942         | 12,237         | 15,000         | 17,500         | 21,000            |
| Staff Costs (Director, Personal Secretary, administration, etc.)                           | 38,282        | 55,000         | 70,000         | 75,000         | 84,500            |
| Operational expenses (equipment, telephones, copying, printing, travel, subsistence, etc.) | 13,802        | 22,000         | 26,000         | 33,000         | 39,000            |
| Contingency  | 0             | 0              | 5,000          | 5,000          | 5,000             |
| Total Core Budget  | 58,026        | 89,237         | 116,000        | 130,500        | 149,500           |
| <i>B. Facilities not charged for:</i>  |               |                |                |                |                   |
| Office at Fellowship of Engineering  | 10,000        | 10,000         | 12,000         | 15,000         | 15,000            |
| <i>C. Fellowships separately funded:</i>   |               |                |                |                |                   |
| Researcher 1 (Wellcome)  | 0             | 15,000         | 23,000         | 25,000         | 4,000             |
| Researcher 2 (COPUS)—in kind   | 6,000         | 24,000         | 24,000         | 24,000         | (?)               |
| Researcher 3 (Leverhulme)  |               | 10,000         | 30,000         | 30,000         | 20,000            |
| Researcher 4 (Esso/Dulverton)  |               |                | 7,000          | 28,000         | 21,000            |
| Researcher 5 (ESRC)  |               | 20,000         | 15,000         | 5,000          |                   |
| Researcher 6   |               |                |                |                |                   |
| Total Fellowship Support   | 6,000         | 69,000         | 99,000         | 112,000        | 45,000(?)         |
| <b>Value of all Resources</b>  | <b>74,026</b> | <b>168,237</b> | <b>227,000</b> | <b>257,500</b> | <b>209,500(?)</b> |

*Assumptions on donations in kind:*

*COPUS Fellows*

Expenses—£4,000 p.a.  
 Salary—£20,000 p.a.

When fully staffed, the office thus comprises the following:

Director  
 Personal Secretary  
 COPUS Fellow (changes every three months)  
 Wellcome Fellow  
 Leverhulme Fellow  
 Esso/Dulverton Fellow  
 Part-time Accountant

These resources are capable of producing each year:

- Briefing notes every three weeks during the parliamentary session (i.e., 12-13 per year).
- A small number of short briefings for Select Committees.
- 2-3 lengthier analyses or “technology assessments”.

This level of activity depends on harnessing the resources and expertise of the science and technology community at large, and also on obtaining additional support from research councils (particularly ESRC). For instance, the ESRC funded a team of academics (equivalent to one man-year) to draft, under POST's direction, a detailed review which was an important source document in the POST analysis of Relationships between Defence and Civil Science and Technology.

Table 1 shows the value of work carried out by POST from 1989, with forecasts of the levels of expenditure to 1993 in the absence of parliamentary funding. For 1991, the value of the work completed will be just over £220,000. The resources committed by sponsors (Figure 4) will allow the core functions of POST to continue to the end of 1992 only (see Table 2), although some Fellowships have funding beyond that into 1993. Additional funds would thus be required for POST to continue through 1993, even at the basic staffing level described above.

27 January 1992]

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TABLE 2  
*Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology: Core Budget*

| Income                   | Outcome |         |          | Estimates |          |
|--------------------------|---------|---------|----------|-----------|----------|
|                          | 1989    | 1990    | 1991     | 1992      | 1993     |
| Balance at start of year | 62,000  | 88,283  | 124,143  | 125,143   | 58,643   |
| Funds promised           | 77,000  | 111,000 | 100,000  | 54,000    | 6,000    |
| Bank interest and sales  | 7,283   | 13,860  | 17,000   | 10,000    | 0        |
| POST expenditure         | -58,000 | -89,000 | -116,000 | -130,500  | -149,500 |
| Carried over at year end | 38,283  | 124,143 | 125,143  | 58,643    | -84,857  |

#### BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

No new funds raised over those already promised by July 1991.

Staff: Director.

Secretary.

Part-time administrative support.

All other fellows seconded (i.e., not paid by POST) or funded by specific grants.

i.e., Wellcome, Leverhulme and Esso/Dulverton includes bank interest and sales of publications to non-Parliamentary organisations.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

#### 3.1 The Current Position

In the last 15 years, the legislatures of many of the more advanced industrial nations have set up new institutions to deal with the issues which involve or are raised by science and technology. All but POST are publicly funded.

The current status of these offices is summarised in Table 3.

TABLE 3  
*Offices of Technology Assessment (world wide)*

| Year | Estab.                   | Country                    | Parliamentary<br>Annual Budget<br>(1991) (in Sterling) | Name of Organisation.  |
|------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--|--|
| 1972 | USA                      | £13 million                |  | Office of Technology Assessment.   |
| 1983 | Germany                  | £1.4 million               |  | Parliamentary Committee for Research<br>Technology, and Technology Assessment. |
| 1983 | France                   | £0.6 million               |  | Parliamentary Office for the Evaluation of Science<br>and Technology Choices.  |
| 1985 | Denmark                  | £1 million                 |  | Danish Technology Board.   |
| 1986 | Netherlands              | £1.3 million               |  | Netherlands Organisation for Technology<br>Assessment.                         |
| 1987 | (European<br>Parliament) | £0.7 million               |  | Science and Technology Options Assessment.                                     |
| 1989 | UK                       | £0.22 million<br>(Charity) |  | Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.                                |

All have the following common features:

- They analyse and present options for the legislatures to consider. They do not make recommendations. In this way they remain objective and not partisan, do not develop along the lines of a lobby group, and do not compromise the responsibility of the legislators for democratic decision-making.
- All are run by governing boards, which generally include representatives from all political parties and, where appropriate, from both upper and lower Houses.
- All have been set up by the legislature to serve the legislature as a whole (and its Committees) rather than individual Houses or individuals within the legislature.
- They focus on issues where a detached objective rational analysis can help by
  - Providing information necessary for the legislative process.
  - Anticipating technological issues.
  - Setting out the facts and identifying where the agreements and disagreements exist on an issue.
  - Identifying potential options for parliamentary action and their ramifications.
  - Assuring objectivity.
  - Contributing to the effectiveness and credibility of the legislative process, not substituting for decisions of elected legislators, but allowing such decisions to be more informed.

27 January 1992]

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These institutions all conduct the longer technology assessments already mentioned in Section 2.3.1, but the main use of their analyses varies according to the priorities of the political system involved. There are three main applications:

- (a) Assist the legislature to make independent assessments of Government policy on the issue concerned (the "oversight" function).
- (b) Provide a source of independent and objective analysis on which policies of the legislature (new legislation or amendments to existing legislation) can be based (the "legislative" function).
- (c) Encourage widespread understanding and discussion of the issues within society. The process of putting together a "technology assessment" gathers, analyses, integrates and interprets the expertise of the nation on a given issue. (This expertise should include the practical or "political" wisdom as well as technical wisdom). This has the effect, not only of informing the legislature, but also the various public parties interested in the issue, promoting discourse and further examination of the issue and its possible solutions. This is the "outreach" function which of course can in turn feed back to the legislature and the Government.

### 3.2 *Organisational Structures*

There are three broad models for the management and funding of technology assessment organisations abroad.

#### 3.2.1 *Internal to the Legislature*

These bodies are entirely within the Legislature's administration. The oversight Board or Committee is comprised only of legislators, and analyses are carried out by staff, funded from the legislature's budget. Thus OTA is an agency of Congress, is funded from the Congressional appropriation, staff are congressional employees, and the Board is composed of members from the House of Representatives and the Senate. The French OPECST is directed by a Board of Deputies and Senators, with staff equivalent to Committee staff, and is funded from the budget of the National Assembly.

#### 3.2.2 *Part Internal, Part External*

Some organisations are run through work commissioned by a small core within the parliamentary administration, but rely to a considerable degree on external sources. The European Parliament's STOA is run by an all-MEP Board with a small complement of European Parliamentary staff for direction and support. But the main part of the expenditure is directed outside to support temporary fellowships or contractor studies.

#### 3.2.3 *All External*

The German Technology Assessment Board is run on a customer-contractor basis whereby the responsible committee of the Bundestag (the Committee on research, technology and technology assessment) assigns the task of providing the necessary services to an external organisation under contract (currently to the Division of Applied Systems Analysis of the Karlsruhe Nuclear Research Centre for five years). The Committee thus directs parliamentary funding to the institute and directs its programme, but no extra staff are placed on the legislature's direct payroll. Of the DM4m budget, half supports staff at the institute, and half is used for specific external contracts.

The Netherlands Organisation for Technology Assessment and the Danish Technology Board have an even more external structure with boards composed of mostly scientists and representatives of various public interests. They encourage and inform debate outside their respective parliaments (the "outreach" function) as much as supporting it inside.

#### 3.2.4 *The Current POST model*

The founders of POST adopted a structure close to that of the OTA by creating a Board which has representatives of both Houses and all parties. But the Board includes representatives of the science and technology community (whereas OTA has a separate Technical Advisory Board). The POST Board thus consists of:

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Chairman                 | — (an MP).   |
| Vice Chairman            | — (Parliamentary)—a peer.  |
| Vice Chairman            | — (non-Parliamentary)—a scientist or engineer.   |
| Treasurer                | — (an MP).   |
| House of Commons         | — 4 MPs broadly representative of the Commons parties.   |
| House of Lords           | — 4 Peers broadly representative of the Lords parties.   |
| Scientists and Engineers | — 6 representatives of the broad groups of science, engineering, medicine, industry, academia. |

The POST Board believes that the model applied over the last 30 months has served well and should not be discarded lightly, although the introduction of parliamentary funding may require some modification of

27 January 1992]

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current procedures (e.g., subjecting POST expenditure to a financial audit similar to that applied to other sectors of Parliamentary expenditure). The Board sees it as important to try and maintain some of the key characteristics which have contributed to POST's effectiveness in any future arrangement. These characteristics include:

- Retention of a Board with a parliamentary majority representing the main customers; i.e., both Houses and all parties.
- Maintaining outward links which mobilise and involve the science and technology community in preparation and review of documents.
- Focusing on issues likely to be of interest to a significant number of Members from both parties, or of relevance to a Select Committee.

#### 4. CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING POSSIBLE PARLIAMENTARY FUNDING OF POST

The House of Commons Commission identified three main areas for detailed consideration by the Information Committee:

- The nature of the service POST might provide in the future.
- The co-ordination of this service with those already provided by the Library.
- The financial needs of POST (this is also assumed to involve the kind of financial arrangements required).

These aspects are discussed separately below:

##### 4.1 *The Nature of the Service*

POST has published Briefing Notes aimed at individual Members since May 1989, and has provided specific trial services to certain Select Committees since April 1990. The questionnaire issued by the Leader of the House of Commons to all Members during June was designed to reveal Members' opinion about the services provided, or proposed to be provided by POST, and needs to be taken into account in assessing the level of future services.

##### 4.1.1 *Services aimed at Individual Members*

The basic level of service on which members were asked to base their opinion in the questionnaire (issued by Leader of the House in June 1991) was the provision of a briefing note every three weeks of the Parliamentary session (i.e., 12 to 13 a year). It is thus relevant to examine the results of the questionnaire to determine whether this level of service is seen as about right, too low or too frequent. In view of the limited direct circulation, there is also the question of whether there is an early case for wider circulation.

###### 4.1.1.1 *Circulation*

One hundred and seventy seven Members specifically supported Parliamentary funding of POST; yet there are only 110 MPs who are members of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, of which a significant number did not complete their questionnaires. There thus appears a strong case for attempting, wherever possible, to increase the direct circulation of briefing notes. Two options present themselves:

1. Expand circulation to include all those supporting Parliamentary funding of POST; or
2. Expand circulation to all Members.

The latter could provide an early option for action in advance of formal Parliamentary funding of POST, if official channels of circulation could be used.

###### 4.1.1.2 *Frequency*

The questionnaire contained a specific question asking Members how often they would expect to request POST to carry out work on their behalf. This received the following replies:

|                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| More than once a week             | 8   |
| More than once a month            | 62  |
| Less frequently than once a month | 132 |
| Never                             | 31  |

Of these replies, 186 specified their interest as being that of an individual Member, while 49 also saw their interest as encompassing their role as a member of a Select Committee.

If this expressed level of demand is translated into requests per year, it totals  $8 \times 40 + 62 \times 9 + 132 \times 4$  (assuming less than once a month equals once a quarter)—i.e., over 1,300 requests per year. This compares with the current output of 12 to 13 per year. Superficially this indicates an almost infinite level of demand. However, two factors must be considered. Firstly, on major issues there will be a lot of interest amongst Members in a single subject. Secondly, individual requests are also made to the Library, and thus particular care must be taken in defining what is an appropriate task for POST, and what is better served

27 January 1992]

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by the existing Library services (see also next section). The POST Board would prefer to continue the existing policy, which is that a subject, even though suggested by an individual member, would only be pursued by POST if the Board (or the successor to the POST Board) were satisfied that the issue was broad enough or important enough to be of interest to a significant number of Parliamentarians rather than to any one individual. In this way one would avoid overlap with the individual support function of the Library, and also ensure that POST's limited resources were applied to the benefit of the largest possible number of Members.

If this approach is taken, then the assessment of the level of service has to some extent to be intuitive. The Board feels that the current frequency of Briefing Notes is about right for the moment, but that the frequency might need to be increased when either the amount of legislation involving science and technology issues was great, or particularly urgent issues (e.g., Kuwait Oil Fires, BSE, etc.) arose.

The Board thus recommends the Committee to consider maintaining or potentially increasing by 50-100 per cent, the part of POST's resources which are devoted to Briefings aimed at the individual MP.

#### 4.1.2 Services to Select Committees

The questionnaire to Select Committees identified eight Committees that would expect to request POST to carry out work on their behalf. Four types of support were identified as follows:

1. Analyses to assist in resolving scientific questions arising during an enquiry (five Committees indicated they could use such a service).
2. Technology assessments to examine issues in depth to prepare the ground and facilitate an enquiry (five Committees indicated that they might use such a service).
3. Brief examinations of possible science and technology issues to help in deciding whether to launch an enquiry (five Committees indicated that they might use such a service).
4. Rapid response to verbal enquiries (one Committee indicated its interest in this).

The number of studies in each category carried out by POST since April 1990 (on a demonstration basis, rather than as a generally available service) is as follows:

Category 1: Two (both for the Environment Committee).

Category 2: Three (Technologies for Teaching, Research and the National Health Service, and Relationships between Defence and Civil Science and Technology).

Category 3: One (High Definition TV).

Given the level of interest expressed by the Select Committees there is clearly a significant potential for increasing the work carried out by POST for Select Committees in all of the stated categories. A conservative conclusion would be to double the ability of POST to support Select Committees with the expectation that, as the relationship between POST and Select Committees develops, the level of activity would grow fairly rapidly for some time.

#### 4.1.3 The House of Lords

POST has been run as a service to both Houses and their Committees. The House of Lords Chairman of Committees has also carried out a survey of Peer's opinions on the question of parliamentary funding of POST and on the level of demand for POST's services, should they be supported. The overall results were similar to those of the House of Commons; on the question whether parliamentary funds should be provided to POST, 151 Peers replied YES (Commons: 177) out of 200 replies (Commons 237). Answers to the question on how often requests would be made of POST to carry out work.

|                                   | Number |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| i.e., More than once a week       | 1      |
| Once a month                      | 22     |
| Less frequently than once a month | 99     |

There is thus clear evidence that Members of the House of Lords wish to continue to receive POST material and to participate in its commissioning.

#### 4.2 Co-ordination with the Libraries

The POST Board has from the outset been anxious to ensure that the additional services provided by POST are complementary to those provided by the Libraries, particularly those of the Science and Environment Section of the House of Commons Library (The House of Lords Library has no scientific services). For this reason POST has not undertaken work for individual Members, and has limited its activities to those where a science and technology-related issue is of broad interest to Parliament, or anticipates issues which Parliament may wish to consider further in the future. Experience over the last two and a half years has demonstrated that, under this guidance, overlap with the Libraries' services is limited, and even where it occurs the two approaches are still complementary.

For instance, of the 27 issues dealt with by POST in the last two and a half years, only four (Food Irradiation, BSE, Antarctica and British Technology Group) have been the subject of contemporary Library research briefings. Even where briefings have been prepared by both organisations on the same subject, the very different approach has demonstrated that the two briefings are complementary to each other, rather than duplicative. POST notes provide an objective description of the key scientific and technological aspects of an issue, which helps Members to understand the areas where there is agreement and disagreement on the science and technology underlying the issue. The links between the underlying science and technology and the questions of policy which concern Parliament are explored. Library research briefings lay more emphasis on the legislative history of the issues, on statements in previous debates and on views expressed in published journals. Both approaches can be valuable to Members.

For this reason the Board would not encourage the development of POST services towards serving individual Members since this would not only stretch POST resources, but also increase the probability of direct overlap with the Libraries' valued services. This view has been taken into account above in interpreting the results of the questionnaire, and its implications for the level of service to be provided by POST.

The Board also feels that, should overlap emerge as a significant problem in the future, a further guarantee of complementarity might be provided by formal representation of either (or both) Libraries on the POST Board under any new arrangements to emerge from this enquiry.

The other main area of POST activities, those of Technology Assessments, are not undertaken by the Library, and thus there is no foreseeable overlap in this area.

#### 4.3 *Financial Needs of POST*

##### 4.3.1 *Size of Budget*

The current and future financial position of POST, in the absence of Parliamentary funding, has already been described. The discussion above suggests that an appropriate level of service to start with would be between that currently provided and double that currently provided. The staff implications and their monetary equivalents would be:

|                    | Staff  | Budget (1991 equivalent) |
|--------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Current Resource   | Director<br>1.5 Support<br>4 Scientist/Engineers | £220,000                 |
| Increased Resource | Director<br>3 Support<br>8 Scientists/Engineers  | £440,000                 |

If it were assumed that POST would continue to serve both Houses, funding would presumably be shared in the usual way between the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

The current commitments of POST's charitable and industrial sponsors could, if maintained, allow a phased transfer to Parliamentary funding, starting in the 1992-93 financial year leading to full support at the desired level of service during the 1993-94 financial year.

##### 4.3.2 *Administrative Mechanisms*

For any given level of financial support by Parliament there are various mechanisms by which it might be administered. In addition, any funding of POST will require more formal arrangements to be developed with the other institutions of Parliament (the Libraries and Select Committees), accounting responsibilities will have to be established, and formal reporting routes developed. Bearing in mind these factors, the examples abroad, and analogous parliamentary institutions such as the National Audit Office, three main options can be envisaged, which are developed below.

All mechanisms would share the following common elements:

- The work of POST would be directed by a Board or Committee which would continue to be representative of all parties and both Houses. The current representation by experts from the science and engineering community could be retained on the Board or separated into a technical advisory committee.
- Subjects would be selected both to respond to needs expressed by individual Members or Select Committees, and to anticipate issues which may concern Parliament in the future.
- The "outreach" function of the current POST should be maintained by continuing to involve the science and technology community in the work of POST.

27 January 1992]

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#### 4.3.2.1 *Option 1—A separate agency funded by Parliament*

The simplest conceptual model would be for Parliament to take over the expenses of the existing Parliamentary Science and Technology Information Foundation and its operating arm POST, with parliamentary funds. In essence, the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee would contract to provide Parliament with specified services in information and analysis of science and technology-related issues. The existing structure of a POST board could be maintained, with appropriate modifications. Formal channels would have to be established to determine what level of resources should be provided and for accounting purposes.

Currently the Board is appointed by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. This already has broad cross-party membership from both Houses, but the appointment procedure could be made more formally accountable to Parliament, for instance by submitting nominations from the PSC for approval by appropriate committees (e.g., Education, Science and the Arts Committee for the Commons and the Science and Technology Committee for the Lords).

#### 4.3.2.2 *Option 2—Part internal and part external*

It is possible to envisage a similar structural arrangement to that of STOA whereby the core functions of POST could be carried out by parliamentary staff who would manage projects carried out by external contractors or institutions which, though funded by Parliament, would not appear on the parliamentary roll. Thus the Director, a deputy and core administrative staff could be parliamentary civil servants, directing operations under the guidance of the POST Board or its equivalent. The external resources could be in the form of Fellowships as at present and/or include funds which could be used to award contracts for specific projects.

In view of the bicameral nature of POST's services, there is no obvious location within the existing Parliamentary structure for POST staff, although they would have tasks in some respects analogous to Clerks of Select Committees. This option would thus require a new administrative arrangement for the UK Parliament.

If the STOA model is followed, the new POST Board might be appointed by Select Committees of the two Houses (Education, Science and the Arts Committee and the Science and Technology Committee) and be responsible for the direction, budget and assessment of POST's activities.

#### 4.3.2.3 *Option 3—Parliamentary Organisation*

A third option would be a new and distinct parliamentary office to be established where all staff are permanent or temporary parliamentary civil servants, as in the OTA in the USA, or the National Audit Office here.

In this model, POST would be structured as an organisation established by either the statutory authority of the Commission or by legislation possibly along similar lines to the National Audit Act. The Director would be an officer of the House, and staff appointed on terms analogous to parliamentary conditions. POST would serve the interests of the Science and other Select Committees, but its terms of reference would also leave it free to initiate its own studies and to continue the Briefing Note service under the guidance of its own Board or equivalent.

If POST were set up along these lines, the POST Board could be established as a Statutory body to discharge functions analogous to the Public Accounts Commission. This would include responsibilities for the quality of the service, considerations related to the budget and resources as well as the detailed work programme of POST. The current emphasis on using the science and technology community outside Parliament for information and review would continue.

#### 4.3.2.4 *Recommendations of the POST Board*

The POST Board favours option 3 on the grounds that all other science and technology assessment agencies abroad have been formally established as distinct offices of the legislature, and have gone on to produce a sustained and valuable service. However, this approach may require primary legislation, which could require time to prepare and implement. As a transitional measure therefore, the POST Board also favours option 1 for the reasons of administrative simplicity and ease of implementation.

The POST Board thus recommends that the Committee support a phased replacement of private funding by Parliamentary funding, starting in financial year 1992-93, and completed by 1993-94, so that POST's resources are at least maintained at their current level for 1992 and substantially increased to reflect the increased level of services to Select Committees in subsequent years. Having ensured the security of POST's services over the short term, the Board also recommends that detailed preparations for option 3 be put in hand.

27 January 1992]

[Continued]

## ANNEX 1

LIST OF SPONSORS *July 1991*

All our major donors (those who have contributed £2,000 or more) are shown in bold. Primary sponsors of POST, who have contributed £10,000 or more are shown by an asterisk\*.

*Members of the House of Commons*

Sir Peter Emery  
Dr Alan Glyn  
Sir Ian Lloyd  
Sir Trevor Skeet  
The Rev W M Smyth  
Hugo Summerson, Esq  
Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher  
Sir Gerard Vaughan  
Kenneth Warren, Esq

*Members of the House of Lords*

Lord Butterworth  
Lord Carr of Hadley  
Earl of Cranbrook  
Lord Flowers  
Lord Hunter  
Lord Kearton  
Lord Kennet  
Earl of Listowel  
Baroness Lockwood  
Lord Redesdale  
Earl of Selborne  
Lord Schon  
Lord Sherfield  
Baroness White

*European Parliament*

Michael Elliott  
Sheila Faith (former MEP)  
Madron Seligman  
Dr Gordon Adam

*Foundations*

**Gatsby Charitable Trust\***  
**Leverhulme Trust**  
**Nuffield Foundation\***  
**Wellcome Trust\***

*Corporate Donors*

Blue Circle  
Boots  
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**British Gas**  
British Nuclear Fuels  
British Petroleum  
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Cambridge Consultants  
**Coopers Lybrand Deloitte**  
Conoco  
**Esso Exploration and Production UK\***  
**Ferranti\***  
**Glaxo\***  
**IBM UK\***  
**ICI\***

27 January 1992]

[Continued]

Independent Broadcasting Authority

London International plc

**Lucas Industries**

Macmillan Publications

Merck Sharp and Dohme

National Grid Co

**National Power\***

**Nirex**

Pilkington

**Plessey\***

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**Shell UK**

Sir Robert McAlpine

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**Trafalgar House**

**United Biscuits**

**Wellcome Foundation**

Wimpey

*Universities and Polytechnics*

Associated Colleges of Further and Higher Education

Association of University Teachers

Dundee University

Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge University

Committee of Directors of Polytechnics

Liverpool Polytechnic

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Loughborough University

Open University

Polytechnic of Central London

Sheffield City Polytechnic

Universities Federation for Animal Welfare

*Science and Technology Organisations*

Aircraft Research Association

Asbestos Research Council

Association of Applied Biologists

Association of Clinical Biochemists

Association of Consulting Scientists

Association of Management and Professional Staffs

BCIRA International Centre for Cast Metals Technology

Biochemical Society

British Pharmacological Society

British Psychological Society

British Veterinary Association

Chartered Institute of Building Service Engineers

**Fellowship of Engineering\***

Institute of Management Services

Institute of Mathematics and its Applications

Institute of Medical Laboratory Sciences

Institute of Metals

Institute of Physics

Institution of Chemical Engineers

Institute of Civil Engineers

Institute of Electrical Engineers

**Institute of Production Engineers**

**Institution of Professionals, Managers and Specialists**

Plastics and Rubber Institute

Research and Development Society

Royal Agricultural Society

Royal College of Pathologists

**Royal Society**

**Royal Society of Chemistry**

27 January 1992]

[Continued]

Society of Applied Bacteriology  
 Society for Chemical Industry  
 Society of General Microbiology  
 Welding Institute  
 World Sugar Research Organisation

## ANNEX 2

## MEMBERS OF THE POST BOARD APRIL 1991

## OFFICERS

*Chairman:* Sir Ian Lloyd MP  
*Vice-Chairman (Parliamentary):* Lord Kennet  
*Vice-Chairman (Non-Parliamentary):* Sir Roger Elliott FRS  
*Treasurer:* Jim Cousins MP  
*Director:* Dr Michael Norton

## PARLIAMENTARY

*Lords:*  
 Lord Rea  
 Lord Rodney  
 Earl of Bessborough  
 Baroness Lockwood

*Commons:*  
 W E Garrett MP  
 Michael Spicer MP  
 Sir Gerard Vaughan MP  
 Mrs Ann Winterton MP

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Michael Elliott MEP

## NON-PARLIAMENTARY

*Science and Medicine*  
 Sir Frederick Warner FRS FEng  
 Professor Sir Hans Kornberg FRS

*Engineering and Industry*  
 Sir Diarmuid Downs CBE FRS FEng  
 Sir Alastair Pilkington FRS FEng

*Academia and General*  
 Lord Flowers FRS  
 Professor John Midwinter OBE FRS FEng

**Ex Officio**  
 The President, Parliamentary and Scientific Committee  
 The Chairman, Parliamentary and Scientific Committee

TRUSTEES OF THE PARLIAMENTARY  
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY INFORMATION FOUNDATION

Lord Kennet  
 Lord Sherfield  
 Sir Ian Lloyd MP  
 The Rt Hon Alfred Morris MP  
 Sir Gerard Vaughan MP

27 January 1992]

[Continued]

## ANNEX 3

## PUBLICATIONS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

## BRIEFING NOTES

| Year         | No. | Subject   |
|--------------|-----|---|
| <b>1989:</b> |     |   |
| May          | 1.  | Food Irradiation  |
| June         | 2.  | Sudden Infant Death Syndrome—Recent Research Developments |
| June         | 3.  | Landfill Gas—Public Hazard or Valuable Resource?          |
| July         | 4.  | Implications of New Technologies in Clinical Testing      |
| October      | 5.  | Decommissioning Nuclear Power Stations                    |
| November     | 6.  | In Vitro Fertilisation and Embryo Research                |
| <b>1990:</b> |     |   |
| January      | 7.  | International Space Station                               |
| January      | 8.  | Drinking Water Quality                                    |
| February     | 9.  | Computer Misuse   |
| March        | 10. | Release of GMOs   |
| March        | 11. | Energy Efficiency   |
| April        | 12. | Superconductivity   |
| April        | 13. | Optical Fibre Networks                                    |
| June         | 14. | BSE and Slow Viruses                                      |
| June         | 15. | Understanding the Human Genome                            |
| July         | 16. | Global Warming  |
| October      | 17. | National Curriculum and A-Level Sciences                  |
| November     | 18. | Antarctica  |
| December     | 19. | Proliferation Control                                     |
| <b>1991:</b> |     |   |
| January      | 20. | Safety Critical Systems                                   |
| February     | 21. | Oil Fires in Kuwait                                       |
| March        | 22. | British Technology Group                                  |
| March        | 23. | Oil Fires in Kuwait—An update                             |
| April        | 24. | High Definition TV  |
| May          | 25. | World Population  |
| June         | 26. | Patenting Life  |
| July         | 27. | Microbes in Food  |
| October      | 28. | Babies and HIV Infection                                  |

## BRIEFINGS DONE AT THE REQUEST OF PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES:

April 1990 Bacteria and Viruses in Seawater

September 1990 Passive Smoking

## TECHNOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

1. Technologies for Teaching (January 1991).
2. Research and the NHS (April 1991).
3. Relationships between Defence and Civil Science and Technology (May 1991).

## Work in progress:

Social Costs of Electricity Generation.

High Performance Computing.

Figure 1

## THE ROLE OF THE PARLIAMENTARY AND SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

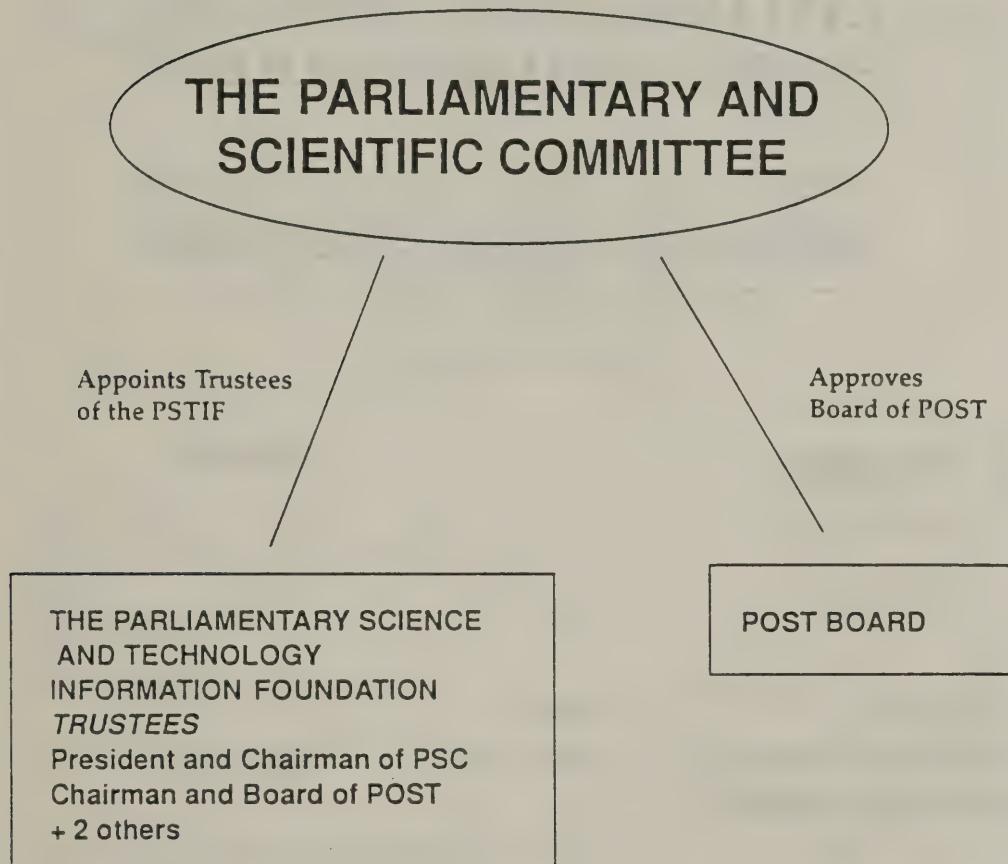
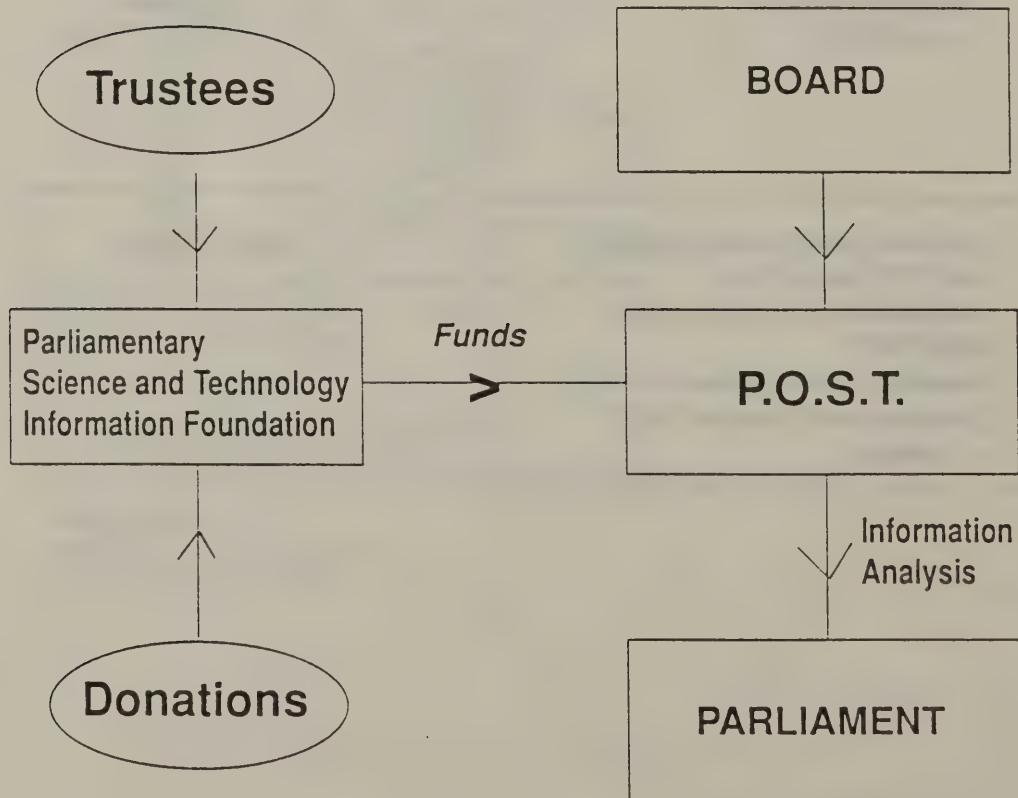


Figure 2



## PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

### ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE



27 January 1992]

[Continued]

Figure 3

## POST METHOD OF OPERATIONS

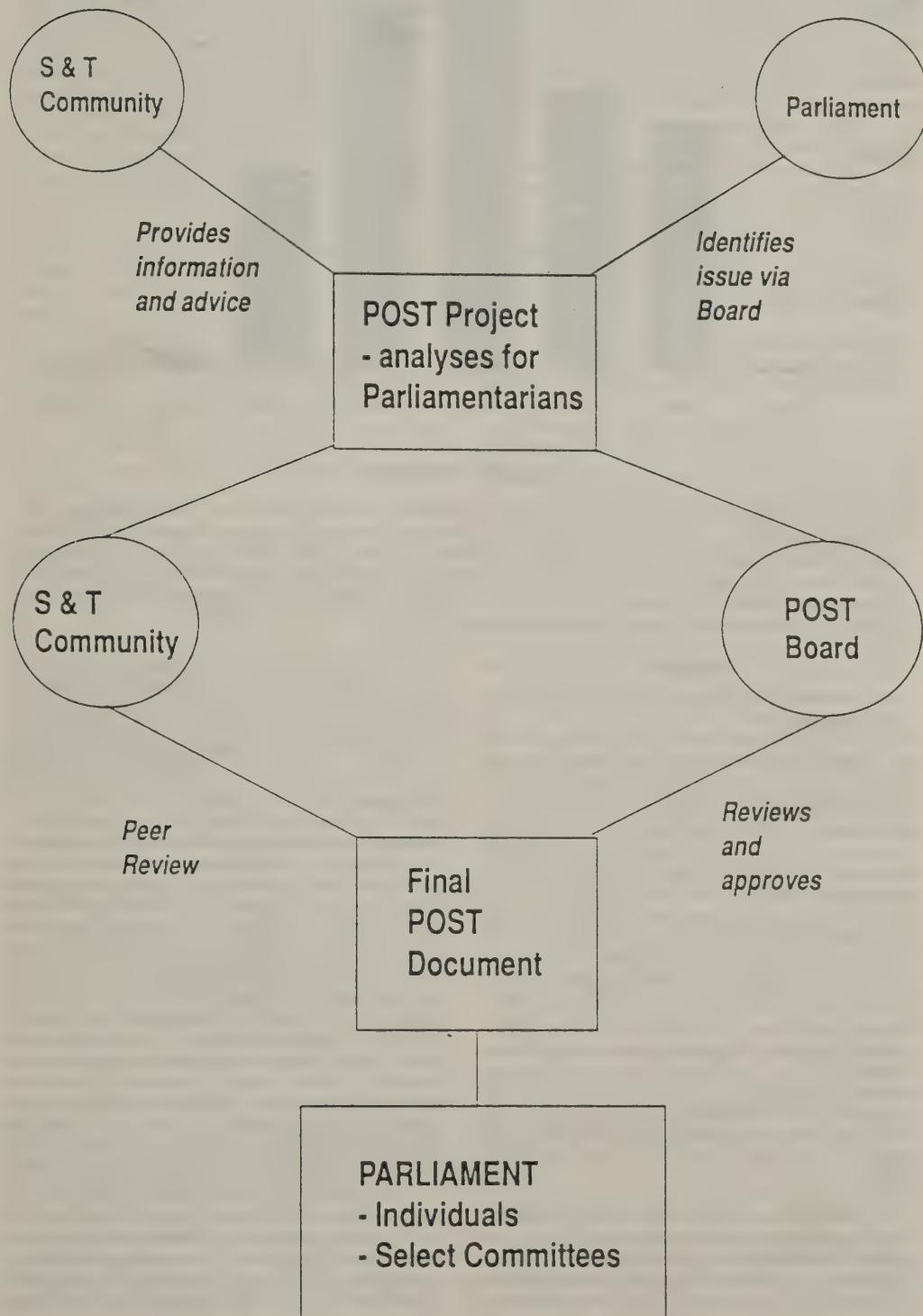
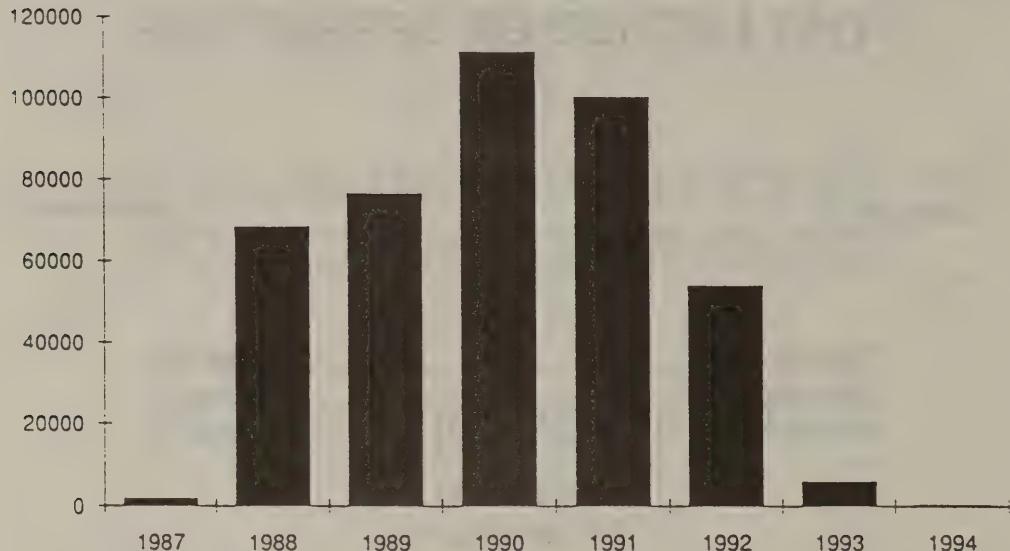


FIGURE 4: SPONSORS' COMMITMENT TO CORE FUNDING



#### Examination of Witnesses

LORD KENNET, a Member of the House of Lords, attending by leave of that House, Vice-Chairman of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, examined. MR JIM COUSINS, a Member of the House, Board Member and Treasurer, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, and SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, a Member of the House, Board Member of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, examined. PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS, Board Member and DR MIKE NORTON, Director, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, called in and examined.

#### Chairman

1. Welcome, Lord Kennet. Could you introduce your colleagues?

(*Lord Kennet*) Mr Chairman, I am here as the Parliamentary Vice-Chairman of the Board of the existing POST. Sir Gerard Vaughan is Chairman of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee under whose umbrella POST has grown up and he is also Chairman of the new Science and Technology sub-committee of the Education Science and Arts Select Committee of the House of Commons. Dr Michael Norton has been the Director of POST since the beginning. Mr Jim Cousins is our Treasurer. On his left is Professor Sir Hans Kornberg, Professor of Biochemistry in the University of Cambridge, a former President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and of the Council for the Advancement of Science Education. He is at present a non-parliamentary member of the Board of POST. Sir Hans is also a trustee of the Nuffield Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, both of which have been among the larger contributors to POST from the non-public sector.

2. Thank you very much. Can I first of all thank you, Lord Kennet, for the very comprehensive and helpful memorandum you submitted to the Committee; we all found it of great interest. Before we begin our questioning I think I should for the

record explain that the Information Committee has been specifically asked by the House of Commons Commission to consider the nature of the service which might be provided by POST in the future, the co-ordination of such a service with those already provided by the House of Commons Library, and the financial needs of POST. We are aware that opinion surveys amongst both Members of Parliament and members of the upper House have already revealed widespread support for the proposition that parliamentary funding should be made available to POST. In the light of these opinion surveys, the former Services Committee urged the House of Commons Commission last July to make such funds available, but they added the view that such funding should be "at a level appropriate to the needs of the organisation, bearing in mind both the level of demand from Members for services of this kind, and the relative priority to be accorded to other demands for new or expanded services for Members". Our own remit from the Commission is, in particular, to assess what might be a reasonable level of provision for POST in the future. We are taking evidence today from POST and from the House of Commons Library, and we may need to take further formal evidence before reaching any conclusions. Meanwhile, we have invited written comments from a number of bodies involved in POST's work, including the Research Councils and some of the organisations who have

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNETH, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

[Continued]

[Chairman *Contd*]

already generously provided funds and accommodation. We have also asked the Director of Finance and Administration, Mr Rodda, to discuss possible financing and administrative arrangements with Dr Norton, and I understand that he is likely to report to us in the near future. I must also stress that we are conscious of the interest in POST in the House of Lords, and that we are anxious that any kind of parliamentary involvement should be agreed by the two Houses. I have already had informal discussions on this subject with my opposite number in the House of Lords—Lord Dainton—and the Clerk, whom I met this morning, and I expect to consult his sub-committee, the Library and Computer Sub-Committee, before the Information Committee is asked to make formal recommendations to the House. Finally, the Committee are conscious of the need for speedy progress to be made towards resolving the financial issues if POST is to continue its work in one way or another. This Committee is not responsible for the delay in its appointment, but we accept that we should now move towards conclusions as quickly as possible. I think I am right, Lord Kennet, that you would like to make a short opening statement. Is that correct?

(*Lord Kennet*) Only if you feel it is desirable, Mr Chairman.

3. I think so.

(*Lord Kennet*) There is one point I would like specifically to make because it might otherwise look like omitting a correction. The financial table which we submitted to you before has been overtaken in one particular, and I have got a new version of it which I can distribute. The new version has a tiny correction in the last year in the projected sums: it accounts also for revenue from sales and from bank interest which was omitted before. It is a peripheral point. Otherwise I believe we are very happy to go straight to questioning.<sup>1</sup>

4. Thank you. In paragraph 2.1 of your paper you have recounted the early history of POST and, of course, you record that the possible need for an organisation to provide impartial briefing on scientific and technological issues was put to Mrs Thatcher in 1986. Mrs Thatcher is then said to have "discouraged the idea of support from public funds" and to have favoured instead an initiative by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee to establish a body with non-governmental financial support. What we would really like to know is, was any undertaking given either by the Prime Minister or by other Ministers in 1986 that public funding might eventually be forthcoming?

(*Lord Kennet*) Mr Chairman, one of your own Members, our Chairman Sir Ian Lloyd, took that deputation to see the Prime Minister, but I appreciate it would be more convenient, and probably easier for the record, if I were to ask Sir Gerard Vaughan, who went with him, to give an answer to that question.

(*Sir Gerard Vaughan*) Yes, Chairman, I was present at that meeting and Mrs Thatcher clearly showed great interest in what we were putting before her. She spent a little while discussing the increasing costs of Parliament and government departments and, while I got a very clear impression from her that she supported what we wanted, she thought we ought to demonstrate its usefulness and that the House of Commons Commission would be more likely to support us if we could show within the House that it was needed and what kind of information we could produce. It was at that point that she suggested that we should start this exercise in the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee which we did. But there was a tacit understanding that, if we could show and demonstrate clearly that the service was needed, it would be looked at carefully. There was no undertaking from other Ministers.

5. I was just going to ask about that. Was that because other Ministers were never involved at that time and it was a purely private meeting with the Prime Minister?

(*Sir Gerard Vaughan*) Yes. Could I add one other thing? When we went to Washington to look at the American Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) I must confess at that stage I went as something of a sceptic, I was not at all sure about this. After talking very carefully with the people running the OTA about the objectivity of their reports and how they set about them and, of course, the expenses of them, I had no doubt of their value. We also had a very long discussion with the Library of Congress because I had been worried, as had some of my colleagues, that there might be an overlap between the OTA and the Congress Library. They were very clear indeed to us, they had absolutely no doubts in their mind that OTA covered a different field—a rather more medium term and more in-depth field than the Library could. I was not at all surprised after we came back to hear that other countries were beginning to move down the same line—Germany, Holland and France.

**Chairman:** Would any member of the Committee like to intervene on this point? Ian, do you want to say anything?

**Sir Ian Lloyd:** I share and would confirm absolutely what Sir Gerard Vaughan has said about our interview with the Prime Minister, and I would not wish to add to that in any way.

**Mr McFall**

6. You are talking about the OTA. Is that the aspect you will focus on because I feel, looking at it, there could be quite a degree of overlap, and information which I would like to get in the science and technology field generally I can go to the Library and get. As a member of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, I receive your briefings, and as a member with a scientific background they are of interest to me, but I have to say there are a lot more things about which, so far as I am concerned, no-one has ever consulted me—not that I would

<sup>1</sup>The corrected Table 2 has been incorporated into the memorandum and appears on p. 5.

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNEDD, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

[Continued]

[Mr McFall *Contd*]

want consulting but in terms of Members of Parliament receiving gratuitous information, that would appear to me to come into two categories. I get that which is of interest to me, which is passed on, and in my own mind I have still to be convinced, and what I can get at the Library is fine for me, so could I ask you to focus on that particular issue?

(*Lord Kennet*) Perhaps we can come now to the matter of substance about relations with the Library, which, as I understand it, is whether or not POST, when established, would become part of the Library service or whether it should be distinct. We wanted it to be distinct and proposed that it should be distinct for the following reasons. The Library service is essentially a collection and distillation of articles, published articles, and as such we know it to be absolutely first-rate. POST's service is different in two respects. First, it has a direct live interface with the science and engineering community of the country at large through the membership of its Governing Board. It can go to them and through that interface it can arrange peer review, by scientists and engineers at all levels, of publications, from the shorter briefing to the longer technology assessments, of which we have been able to do only two or three so far. There is that, and there is also the fact that the POST papers are able to go into policy analysis and to explore conflicting policy proposals on scientific matters. So much for the live interface versus the Library approach. The second point is that the Library service is confined by its nature to published information, which is often a little bit out of date—a matter of months and in the case of books, years. In fields as fast-moving as the most contentious fields of science and technology at the moment, that is a limitation. POST is free to ring up the fellow who is doing the job and get it straight from him before it is published, and that POST does because it has scientists and engineers on its own staff. So we see the two functions as complementary and Parliament would be under-informed without either, but in a certain sense POST has arisen because of the natural limitations of the Library service. This is no criticism of your own Library or the House of Lords Library but the two Library services are limited by what they are.

(*Sir Gerard Vaughan*) May I add one point. I would ask you, when you look at the work that POST has been doing, to see it within its context, in that it is a start-up position. It has had very limited resources but to some extent it has been influenced by people offering work of fellows to them, and it has not had quite the close relationship with Members that I would have thought it would develop in the future. Particularly, it has not yet had the relationship with the select committees which I would have thought it would have in the future. So I would ask you to see it, as I say, as a start-up position rather than an ideal position.

Mr Waller

7. The briefing notes which have been mentioned are clearly of a high standard and I certainly find them useful and interesting, but could you say, do Members of Parliament in general terms telephone POST and ask for information about particular points, because clearly they do get in touch with the Library for detailed briefings that they require? Is there that kind of interaction between Members and POST?

(*Lord Kennet*) I would like to ask the Director to answer that.

(*Dr Norton*) There are two types of enquiries. We occasionally do get a Member phoning up and asking us a specific question which is unrelated to our current work from time to time, and in order to avoid duplication with the Library, any such enquiry we refer to the Library because they are very keen to respond to specific *ad-hoc* enquiries. The other type of enquiry follows from the fact that we have done a briefing note and if you receive them, as you do, you will know that at the end of every four pages we give a contact name and telephone number for any further information. Members do occasionally phone up and say, "Can I have a look at your background information on this particular aspect," or may phone up with a specific enquiry and say, "Why do scientists feel this way as opposed to another way?" Those questions are clearly dealt with on a real-time basis.

8. Would you like to see it as part of your role for the future, as far as *ad hoc* enquiries are concerned, to deal with those directly, bearing in mind that, of course, you do have, as you say, very good contacts as far as the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee is concerned, who are experts in their own fields and have the most up-to-date information?

(*Dr Norton*) I personally would prefer to leave responding to *ad hoc* enquiries with the Library. If the Library were to feel that on a particular issue they would be more likely to get accurate information by calling someone in the field, obviously we would be very happy either to do that or advise them accordingly, but I think for *ad hoc* enquiries the prime responsibility needs to remain with the Library.

(*Lord Kennet*) I think we should distinguish here between *ad hoc* enquiries needing a simple yes or no or, "Can you give me a book reference", on the one hand, and on the other, "Would you please consider doing a four-page briefing or a 150-page technology assessment?" In the latter case the request would have come to us and is referred to the Board of POST, who decide which things shall be tackled and in what order. There is, of course, another line of approach either direct between a Member of the House and any member of the Board.

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNEDD, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

[Continued]

**Mr Batiste**

9. Would you consider, then, that the essential difference between yourselves and the Library service is your access to outside expertise in the preparation of your work? Is that the fundamental difference as you perceive it?

(*Lord Kennet*) It is certainly the principal difference, yes. It is not in the nature of the Library to hold scientific review conferences or to call in outside people, even in small groups of a couple or three, to sit round a table and go through a subject, still less to hold a whole day meeting of 80 or 100 people jointly with the Royal Society for the purpose of reviewing the major projects. We have done this three times and hope to develop that sort of approach in the future. I do not think any library anywhere is really set up to function in that way.

10. Do you maintain a database of experts whom you can call on which is made widely available within Parliament or to individuals or select committees or whatever?

(*Dr Norton*) In a broad understanding of the term database, the answer would be yes, but the main database would be the membership of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, which is around 350 different technical or scientific organisations, ranging from universities to professional associations to individual companies. We have a fallback database but because of the representation on the POST Board of distinguished scientists and engineers, there is a very extensive personal network of contacts which can be accessed at any particular time. So my only qualification is the Library sense of the word "database", which is a computer screen which scrolls forward and gives you key word indices. Ours is more in terms of a network of either direct personal contacts or through the good offices and contacts of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee and the Board members.

11. To what extent would you see yourself, if at all, as part of the lobby for science in the United Kingdom?

(*Dr Norton*) The lobby for science group, such as SBS and others like that, is part of the general scientific community and they are part of the spectrum of scientific opinion that one would need to be aware of. Equally there will be others of that community who hold very different views from the lobby groups and POST's aim is to represent objectively and accurately a whole range of scientific views on any particular issue where those views exist and to display that, if you like, resolution with clarity so that Members can better understand the reasons for groups having different views and help informed decisions.

(*Lord Kennet*) POST is not part of any lobby; it is a service to Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Might I ask Sir Hans Kornberg if he has anything to say on this?

(*Professor Sir Hans Kornberg*) Thank you, Chairman. I merely wish to underline what Lord Kennet has said. I am sure you, like me, will have

seen the advertisement which appears on television quite frequently for the Automobile Association where the hapless motorist who is caught in an accident says "I can't do it but I know a man who can". That in a sense is our ethos too. When, for example, Dr Norton asks me to look at the rough draft of a particular briefing note in my own area, it is quite common that I very readily reach the limit of my competence and need to have informed opinion. The fact that I am sitting in a university which is surrounded by first-rate scientists and I am surrounded by first-rate scientists means I have ready access to them to ask them to look at the briefing note, to look at the draft to see what we have omitted, what new findings there are which perhaps change our perspective. It is this ability instantly to be in touch with the research under way and to give a perspective which we hope will allow you to be able to achieve a balanced judgment of the risks and benefits of a procedure, rather than to be subject only to either the input of pressure groups or alternatively the information which has not been properly conveyed, that I think is the main strength of POST. Perhaps we can see this most clearly in the list of things that have been done which have been described in annex 3 to the Memorandum<sup>1</sup> in so far as they went up to the end of last year, where, for example, item 10 is the release of genetically manipulated organisms. I happen to be Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Genetic Manipulations and therefore I was not only able to check the essential scientific validity but was able to give an update on the latest positions in the European Commission as regards directives and so on, which could not have been done from published material in the Library because it was not available in published form as yet. Similarly when we look at oil fires in Kuwait, which is no. 21, and the update, no. 23, Sir Frederick Warner who produced no. 23 was, in fact, the Chairman of the Royal Society Study Group on Risk Assessment and, therefore, had unique experience of how to interpret atmospheric pollution and the consequences for atmospheric pollution such as might have been released by oil fires in the Gulf. There is no way I can see in which that information could have been got out of published material in the Library. I think it is the fact that the central organisation in POST has a ready access to an invisible college. That is its great strength and distinguishes it from the Library.

**Mr Batiste**

12. To what extent do you think that relationship would be lost if POST were perceived as part of a government-funded organisation?

(*Lord Kennet*) Perhaps I could field that one. We do not seek to be part of a government-funded organisation. We seek to be part of Parliament. We want to be a part of the parliamentary structure. That is the best answer. The other bodies in other

<sup>1</sup>See p. 14.

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNEDD, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

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[Continued]

[Mr Batiste *Contd*]

countries, which I hope we will come on to later, our predecessors who are still there, are all part of the parliamentary structure (with one exception), and none of them is part of the government structure. Needless to say, all Western governments have technology assessment outfits of one sort or another. So we want to give Parliament an independent source of information.

**Mr McFall:** I would still like to pursue the issue of overlap between the Library and yourselves. The answers are circling round that. If you like, I will wait to deal with that.

## Chairman

13. Although you are now seeking public funds for POST, would you agree there are some advantages in keeping the organisation in its present form? What discussions have you had with the funding organisations—for example, Leverhulme, Nuffield and Wellcome—and the Research Councils about the possibility of keeping POST going in its present independent form? If parliamentary funding is not forthcoming, do you really expect POST to fold up, to collapse? How long could POST survive without parliamentary funding? There is quite a compendium there. Who is going to answer?

*(Lord Kennet)* I would like to answer in very broad outline, then ask my colleagues to fill it in. We are quite certain that it would be better if we could become publicly funded as an arm of Parliament. Our immediate reason for that is that the money we have asked for is going to run out. We asked for money for three years only to demonstrate our services. We hope that they have proved satisfactory enough for us to say to our benefactors, "Thank you very much for getting us off the ground. Luckily things have turned out as we hoped, we are not going to need you any more". If parliamentary funding is not forthcoming, we should all take a deep breath and consider the situation, but everything we have done has been done with a view to becoming worthy of parliamentary funding and we have now come to the point on the timetable when we seek it.

*(Sir Gerard Vaughan)* With parliamentary funding, we see a service for Members of Parliament controlled by Members of Parliament quite independent from the executive, quite independent from any lobbying. We have already been over this ground but I think it is important. It would be a creature of the Members of the House.

## Mr Bennett

14. If it is going to be a creature of the Members of the House, surely it has to respond to what Members want it to do in the way that the Library is going to do. So how does it need to be something separate rather than perhaps just a part of the Library?

*(Lord Kennet)* Perhaps we could turn here to precedents of what is done in other countries where in all of them the corresponding body is on parliamentary funds. What they all do is what we do

already: that is, they have a board which decides what is going to be done. It does not decide out of its own head what is going to be done, but it listens to approaches which come from individual Members of Parliament and from Select Committees of the House of Commons and the House of Lords for work on this or that subject. Naturally when there is something which hits the headlines quite a lot of people are interested and say so, and we do it. Then sometimes there is nothing very much in the headlines and we have to make a guess as to what is likely to hit the headlines in future and try to get it right. But it is intended that it shall continue to be, as it has been, as responsive as practically possible to suggestions to do this or that from individual Members of Parliament. It is not in the business of answering short, simple questions; it is in the business of producing reviews of differing lengths of complex issues, stating both sides of the matter, to enlighten the whole field. But, of course, it is indeed open to individual suggestions.

*(Sir Gerard Vaughan)* May I add one point to that. Chernobyl was a very good example because when the catastrophe occurred there was a great deal of anxiety in the House and in the press. The information in the press was often misleading and out of date. We were able to get on to the leading nuclear scientist in this country and produced a paper within 48 hours, which has stood the test of time and examination since and was undoubtedly very reassuring to those of us in the House who wondered what this catastrophe was going to mean.

15. But I am not questioning the quality of the work. What I am questioning is how, in fact, it is organised. It seems to me that if you go through the Library the big advantage is that Members put in requests to the Library and then the Library processes them. What you are saying to me is that you in some way vet the requests that come from Members and you decide some are valid and some not so valid and, therefore, you allocate your resources to the ones which you think are in an area worth pursuing rather than the ones Members want to pursue. It seems to me with limited resources in the House of Commons I would prefer to see more resources I can perhaps call down rather than somebody else choosing to allocate them.

*(Lord Kennet)* We publish things; and there is that difference between a single Member approaching the Library and approaching us. If we do it we publish it, and it is available to the entire distribution, whereas the response to a Member who makes an enquiry of the Library is made to him privately.

16. But if the Library gets a lot of responses, you get a Library paper or you get the Library's response duplicated, one name crossed out and another name put in?

*(Lord Kennet)* Quite true. This is a Library paper but it has probably not been subject to very wide peer review amongst scientists outside and it is inevitably not quite up-to-date, and, relies on published material.

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNETH, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

[Continued]

[Mr Bennett *Contd*]

17. But I am not questioning the quality of your work. What I am suggesting is that the quality of some of the work could be done just as effectively as you do it at the moment?

(*Dr Norton*) Might I try to help the discussion by trying to draw a distinction between responsive and anticipatory work. The main drive for Offices of Technology Assessment which have been established abroad has been entirely anticipatory, to try and foresee the effects of technological change and describe them to the legislature in such a way that the legislature can anticipate problems which are emerging or are going to emerge in the future. That is one of the primary functions of POST in future, to bring together, if you like, knowledge, which may come from individual members but which may come from the scientific community, and identify issues which are going to be future issues for Parliament and where analysis may help. That is the main activity of organisations abroad and it is also one of our main activities, but particularly in the short term we also consider that we must try and respond on a very much more short-term basis to issues which are going to interest Members. That is why we also carry out the briefing note service, which tries to have a very much shorter response time, say three to six weeks, rather than the longer time it takes to assemble a full technology assessment. So it is only this shorter response time we have which has potential overlap with the Library service and if you look at that, the two services that are provided, given that all the subjects probably do emanate from the individual Members, there needs to be some structure involving the Board, perhaps involving the Library, which decides which approach, whether the POST approach or the Library approach, is going to be the most helpful to Members. We have suggested some sort of co-ordination mechanism might be fairly readily adopted to make sure Members get the best service from the resources, whether POST or Library.

18. If I look at Annex 3 to the Memorandum, which is the work you have done basically, it seems to me that almost everything in there is the sort of thing that you scientists should have been dealing with in a journalistic way and, therefore, it is not pointing me to things which we ought to be thinking about which I have not any inkling is a problem.

(*Mr Cousins*) I think some of the most important things are actually to be found at the bottom of that particular page, where the anticipatory work is to be found, but we have been successful in getting the original work or perhaps the original information assembled in original ways on subjects such as defence research, possibilities of conversion of defence facilities for other activities and things like research in the NHS. That is not the kind of thing that could really be conducted by the Library. We have been successful in getting outside funding through the research councils, I think, in nearly all those cases for that kind of thing, but clearly if one were not so dependent upon outside funding one

could have a programme for these things and one could then organise properly. We are not really at present in that kind of position.

Sir Ian Lloyd

19. I was going to ask Dr Norton whether he would agree that neither the Library of Congress nor the Congressional Research Service nor the Library of the House of Commons nor, indeed, POST has yet endeavoured, or has the resources at the present time, to produce the kind of major technology assessment which the OTA has itself produced, and while we have accepted it as a long-term goal, this in a sense is the Rolls-Royce of technology assessment at which most of us in Europe are aiming and at the moment it is a question of resources as much as philosophy that we have not begun to do that in the United Kingdom.

(*Mr Cousins*) That is absolutely right. Our intention would have been to run ahead of the issues and not, as it were, behind them, to anticipate and not to respond. We have, as I say, had some success in attracting outside funding to do so but clearly there are limitations on how you can organise an adequate programme of work of that kind if you rely on raising money from outside.

Mr McFall

20. Can I go back to the main question and say if you do not receive funding from Wellcome, Nuffield, Leverhulme and your sponsors and do not get the Parliamentary funding, will you fold up?

(*Mr Cousins*) As the Hon. Treasurer, perhaps I could answer that. As you will see from the last page of the submission, sponsors have been extremely generous in making POST possible and in responding to the suggestion made by the then Prime Minister back in 1986. As you will see from that table, they did so on the basis that they were sponsoring an initiative and not becoming permanently responsible for funding something forever and we have already passed the peak of that. The financial resources so far generated would enable POST to function apparently until the start of the financial year 1993-94. That does leave no room for some of this anticipatory work that I think is the most important aspect and one that we want to develop, and I am anxious myself that if there is not, whatever happens after 1993-94, some kind of limited transitional funding which could perhaps be drawn down rather than allocated, should it be necessary, then the work of POST will start to run down in the course of this coming financial year, 1992-93.

Chairman

21. Could I quickly pick up something there. When you talked about the financial year 1993-94, were you meaning you could go up to April 1993 or that you could get through most of that financial year?

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNEDY, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

[Continued]

[Chairman Contd]

(Mr Cousins) No, we could go up to April 1993.

**Mr McFall**

22. So in 12 months' time I take it from your answer you will not be able to proceed?

(Mr Cousins) Correct, but I think if we do not have some kind of transitional funding then the work of the organisation will start to run down, as you would anticipate, in the course of this next financial year. Can I add something, too, because it does concern me a little, that while we have been very successful in getting sponsors and people to second people—and I have no doubt that the secondment of people is something that could continue into the future—I am concerned myself that we should not be overly dependent upon private funding. We have taken some money direct from companies but most is through foundations or through research councils. That worries me a little and I would want to see the organisation set up on a basis where it was not dependent upon that and where, in fact, it was able to turn private funding away. We are not in that position at the present time.

**Mr Batiste**

23. I have a question about this transitional funding which I was not clear about. If you had an undertaking from Parliament that funding would be provided for the year 1993-94, would I be right in understanding that you would be fully financed for the following year and would not therefore, need to have anything for 1992-93? You are funded for that year? If on the other hand you were unsure as to where 1993-94 was going, you would then need some transitional funding for the year before, otherwise you would run down ahead of that decision: is that what you are saying?

(Mr Cousins) What I am saying is, if we do not receive funding of the kind we are discussing, the organisation will collapse after April 1993. My own view is that, if we do not receive some kind of transitional support—maybe of a quite modest kind—there will be some initiatives that we ought to take in the course of this next financial year that we will not be able to take, if I can put it like that. My own view is that, looking at the situation and trying to take a reasonable view of the budget, I think the kinds of transitional funding I have in mind are funds that could be drawn down to launch specific projects and programmes rather than funds which would be allocated to POST to dispose of through its normal routine finances, and I am therefore talking about the financial year in front of us, 1992-93.

(Sir Gerard Vaughan) Just as I think this body if it is going to function ought to be totally independent from the executive, I think it is terribly important that it should be independent from outside funders with their own ideas of priorities things such as the Treasurer has been mentioning. If it is to be a creature of Parliament, which would make it really effective, it must be quite independent from all outside pressure.

**Mr Bennett**

24. How much do you earn from the Select Committees?

(Dr Norton) The work we have done for Select Committees so far has been free.

**Mr McFall:** Tell me what you have done for them.

**Mr Bennett**

25. Would it be feasible for you to charge them, just as any other group that is outside, either as consultants to the Select Committee or undertaking commissioned research such as groups have done for the Health and Social Services Committee?

(Dr Norton) To answer both questions, the work we have done so far has comprised two short briefings for the Environment Committee to help them deal with particular evidence they were having difficulty with, one on passive smoking, one on marine pollution; we have also done a briefing statement taking into account the interests of a Select Committee in deciding whether or not it wanted to look into that subject, and also one of our first technology assessments on computers in schools was sufficiently interesting to excite the interest of the Education Committee who considered following that on with an inquiry. All these have been done on a demonstration basis and therefore have been done on an informal basis with the clerk. We have not had any formal discussions with committees about any ways of recompensing for future work. The work we did was done in the spirit of POST being a demonstration service to try and identify services which might be useful to the various organs of Parliament.

26. Could you generate sufficient funds to keep going if Select Committees used you and paid for that?

(Dr Norton) The proportion of work which would be responsive to Select Committees would be very unlikely to cover the entire resources of POST. As we discussed earlier, the function of POST to anticipate issues would, of course, have to be supported by non-earmarked or non-responsive funds if it were generally going to anticipate issues which others were not fully aware of yet.

(Mr Cousins) I think there is a distinction to be made between short-term servicing and advice work which could be offered to Select Committees, or might be requested by them for that. I think one ought to avoid unnecessary churning of money and decisions between committees. That is something that ought to be available and be supplied for the main grant without any question. If, on the other hand, a Select Committee, let us say the Select Committee on Defence, said "We would like a major programme of anticipatory work on defence conversion" or something like that, that I think would be a quite different matter.

(Lord Kennet) We would be against tying ourselves to committee funding for any substantial

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNEDY, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

*[Continued***[Mr Bennett Contd]**

part of our funding, if only because it is going to lead to fluctuations in the amount and to run a coherent team requires a certain stability in the income.

**Chairman**

27. You need assured income?

(*Lord Kennet*) We need assured income. If all the committees suddenly decided one month they wanted something, then there was a gap of eight months where none did, we would have to take on staff, stand them down again and you would not get a good team that way.

**Mr Waller**

28. As a point of clarification, Mr Cousins said there were certain initiatives which would not be able to go ahead if resources were not available. Was that in terms of further briefing notes or were there new ideas, new directions, which could not be followed? Could you elaborate on what sort of initiatives were in your mind?

(*Mr Cousins*) Initiatives that may well spring from work that we are doing now on, for example, subjects like the issue of super-computing and sophisticated computer networks, and also in this defence area in which we have done a certain amount of work. I personally would like to see us do a lot more work there. So far the Economic and Social Research Council has come up with a lot of support for this but I would like, if necessary, to go somewhat further. Of course, there may be, there will be, other subjects you cannot anticipate that come in the course of the year where people feel that something more long term is required, and that kind of thing. I do stress again here we are talking about transitional funding. I am not asking for money to be allocated to POST, I am asking for money to be available, should it be necessary in response to some initiative of that kind, so that it can be drawn down rather than allocated from the start of the financial year April 1993. That is the year when the base funding is required.

**Mr Batiste**

29. I can see the problem in looking at the estimates you have for your core budget under Table 2 of 2.4 of your Memorandum, but it seems to me within the budget for 1992 you have an estimated expenditure of £130,000 which is a substantial increase over 1991 and which at the end of the year, given a balance at the start of the year and funds that have been promised, would still leave you with a surplus. I can see in 1993 you are in a devastating position unless additional funds are made available, but you have allowed already within your budget a substantial increase in expenditure in 1992. I am curious about this impact on transition. It seems to me you still have plenty of scope for expansion.

(*Mr Cousins*) We have some scope. I would ask the Committee to bear in mind the terms in which I structured that particular request. I repeat again, I

am not asking for funds to be allocated for POST: I am asking for funds to be available should they be necessary to be drawn down in the financial year 1992-93.

**Chairman**

30. Could we jump a little. We have kept touching on the question of overlap with the Library. I think this one seems to open up questions with a few of the members of the Committee. Would you agree there are those who envisage that there is advantage in your briefing notes and the Library's background papers being combined? If this were possible, would you agree that the two services might also in some way be combined?

(*Lord Kennet*) It would not be our preferred solution, Chairman, partly for the reasons I have already given. Perhaps I could run through them in a more orderly way. If we compare the subjects that have been covered by POST and by the Library during the period of POST's existence, we find there is very little overlap and that even on those rare occasions when they do overlap the treatment on each side has been rather different for the reasons I have already explained. POST focusses on the issues where policy is all bound up with the underlying science and technology, often as a result of scientific uncertainty. POST analyses and explores those links as well as explaining the science and technology concerned. The Library, of course, can always find an explanation for science and technology in the printed material. On some issues the information is unpublished, because it is very recent or for other reasons. The only approach then is the POST approach via the living scientific community. We just ask people. The Library service is essentially informative in that it tells you what has appeared in the published literature. POST is not only informative but also analytical on the direct questions posed by the enquiry. That applies to both categories of publication, the short briefings and the long technology assessments. The short briefings are mini-technology assessments. I have spoken about how we are able to harness the different expertise at very short notice. There is no resistance to sudden requests from POST for time and help in the scientific and engineering community. I am not saying there is resistance to requests from the Library, because the Library do not make such requests.

**Mr Bennett**

31. But they do, do they not? My experience is that the Library do make those requests for information. When you want a document from the Library they are remarkably good at trawling both the published material, the databases, and at getting names of people for you.

(*Lord Kennet*) I do not know what the scale of Library enquiries on the telephone or by personal contacts outside the Library is. I would be surprised if they were able to call a meeting of three, four or

27 January 1992

LORD KENNEDD, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

[Continued]

[Mr Bennett *Contd*]

five people to thrash out a scientific issue. No doubt you will be able to put this to them later, Mr Chairman. Lastly, we attach quite a lot of weight to the results of that questionnaire which was sent round where a large percentage—and it was quite a respectable sample of the total Members of both Houses—were overwhelmingly in favour of POST's continuing doing the sort of things it does now. All those Members who were in favour of it, of course, are familiar with the Library services and use them and their favourable judgment was essentially a judgment that, "Yes, they do a good job, but once we are offered this—not alternative but—this augmentation to the Library services, we shall use it."

### Mr McFall

32. I disagree with Lord Kennett there in terms of that questionnaire. Certainly when it was sent to me I did not see it in relation to the Library, as to what the Library do, "Is it inadequate or could more be done?" It was as to the usefulness of the briefing papers from POST, and I do find them useful and I say that to you. But I come back to the point that Sir Gerard says POST is a creature of Parliament at the disposal of the Members. I do not think it can be at the disposal of the Members, given the present arrangements, because there is a randomness about briefing papers. For example, "Oil Fires in Kuwait" was very useful. That particular paper—I did not know it was coming out—was of good use but I did not request it at that particular time. I did not know it was coming until the morning it came, so as to its being a creature of Members of Parliament, I think that experience knocks that particular assertion on the head. Also on the issue of the Library services, I find them informative and also analytical and I would again differ from you in some of your comments that it is at the direct line interface with the country at large. I think that sums up what Professor Sir Hans Kornberg was saying about, "I cannot do it but I know a man who can." When I go to the Library—which is the very thing that I did just before I came up here today—I want a contact with a theologian. The Library cannot give me what I am looking for but they can give me the names and addresses of people I can contact for what I am looking for and I will pursue that at a later date. So what I am saying to you is, yes, you are doing a valuable service with the briefing papers and briefing notes or technology assessment, but if we had to commit money towards giving it, let us be more precise as to what you are going to do. I suggest there is a high degree of overlap between the briefing papers and the Library. I take your point on technology assessment. There may be some difference but we have to be much more specific if we are going to apportion public finance to POST activities.

(Mr Cousins) Could I respond very briefly to that. Clearly I regard what the Library does and what POST does as being essentially complementary. The fact that so far there has been very little overlap in

the kinds of work the Library has done in terms of production of briefing material and what POST has done lends support to that. I would not object at all if, as part of the award of funds, there were to be some formal procedure that would prevent overlap. I think that would be a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It is perfectly true also that because of the way that POST is organised it is fair to say that the people on it are a fairly randomly produced body of people, but then, John, it would not perhaps strike you as being peculiar that there were one or two members on the POST Board who were perhaps anticipating you might want the information about oil fires in Kuwait and perhaps had a similar concern themselves. So although it is random it is not totally random. Again it is something that can be taken account of in the award of funds, that clearly with the award of funds must go a more formally worked-out arrangement as to who these people are and to whom they are responsible. We are taking that as read.

(Lord Kennett) Could I chip in on that question before we leave it. We have actually got a figure. At the time we submitted our paper POST had published 27 briefing notes; the Library had published briefing notes on four of those 27 subjects. I do not think that is really a very high degree of overlap.

33. I think we could examine that particular aspect. This is not a like-for-like situation and I think that is a point you have made, that what the Library produces and what you produce is something which is complementary, as Mr Cousins said, so I do not take the comparison of 27 against four as having any meaning whatsoever.

(Dr Norton) Can I make a clarification. The POST Board have been very aware of the danger of duplication of scarce resources from the very beginning and so from the first decision of the Board to assemble a list of briefings on a given subject, I have always written to the Library immediately after a POST Board decision, so as to inform them as soon as possible of what our next three or four month's programme is. So we have always tried to ensure that the Library is aware of our current and planned programme as far as that is foreseeable. I am very sensitive to the points that have been made by Mr McFall and others in that no-one really wants to set up a service that is in any way competitive or duplicative of what is already being done. That is why we have tried to identify areas where the POST approach, which is to tap into the science and technology community, may be the best approach for the subject and where the Library approach, which is to use its instant access to very approachable databases and contacts, is the best approach. We have tried to do it on an informal basis through the mechanism I described up to now. Were we to become a proper Parliamentary body there would have to be a very strong case for a formal mechanism so that both parties, the POST Board and the Library, are satisfied that whichever approach is being taken in response to Members'

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNEDY, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

*[Continued***[Mr McFall Contd]**

comments on a given issue is the right one. I think everyone involved in POST is very keen to work with the Library to ensure that the best use is made of the available resources.

34. Could I try to sum up in that case, that the briefing notes may well have, and do have, sufficient measures in order not to avoid too much overlap with the briefing papers, but that area could be looked at in the future between yourselves and the Library?

(*Dr Norton*) Quite true.

35. Where you come into your own and where you have a strength is perhaps in the area of technology assessment and that should be focused on, is that correct?

(*Dr Norton*) I think that is fair, yes.

**Mr Waller**

36. On that last point, it is clear that the whole area of technological assessment is one on which you would like to do more but it would require considerably greater funds than you have available to you at the present time. So essentially, in order to perform that function we would have to recommend greater resources. If one is looking at the existing resources, however, rather than an increase, it is clear that the possibility of overlap is quite considerable and, indeed, in a very even-handed memorandum which the Librarian produced for us he referred to that and particularly to considerable potential overlap if the number of POST's briefing papers was to increase. He also does suggest as to POST's briefing papers that, if the Library itself had extra resources, it could produce a significant increase in the number of scientific papers prepared for Members generally by the Library. This would be the economically efficient way of providing support for Parliament in this broad subject area. If one is talking about existing resource rather than increase in order to do something you believe would bring out the great strength of POST, would you agree with that assessment? Is it in other words a matter of providing considerably greater resources in order to provide that peculiarly unique function that POST could ideally provide?

(*Dr Norton*) If I might respond to that, Chairman, POST's submission does not actually propose any significant increase in frequency of briefing papers. We feel that the number of subjects to emerge which suit a POST approach is not a lot more than one a month and, for that reason, we have proposed that that remain the baseline exactly to avoid trying to increase a service which is closest to that of the Library although, as you know, we do believe the way we manage it is still complementary. So, having established that as a baseline service, which the questionnaire shows members do actually appreciate, we have over the last six or nine months taken on new staff with additional fellowships and devoted those primarily to technology assessments. As you may be aware, we have published recently

—in fact, since this Committee started its inquiry —a large review of high performance computing which has been very well received and has actually been helpful to a number of Members and also to people outside Parliament, particularly government departments. We are also in the process of publishing or finalising one or two other technology assessments and have others in progress. So we have, if you like, frozen the proportion of our resources which goes towards briefings at this basic level, and all additional resources are being provided to the more anticipatory technology assessments. My understanding is that is the way the Board would wish to proceed.

(*Sir Gerard Vaughan*) May I make a general comment? I hope that in your assessment of this you will—I may not be putting this terribly well—be looking a little bit at the future. A lot of your judgment will depend a good deal on how much priority you give to science and technology and the awareness of it in the future prosperity of this country, how much you think Members of Parliament should be aware of scientific and technology things that this field can offer to us. I am very influenced by the fact that other countries, having looked at what is going on in the States just as we did, have decided this is worthwhile and important to them, in fact, have invested really quite large sums of money already in this field of increasing their parliamentary awareness of what is going on. When you think that in this country we do not have a minister for science which most other countries do, we do not have a department for science, we really have very little easy access to science in our House, we do not have a full Select Committee for science, I think it makes this kind of information service even more important. It is only one step, agreed, in raising our understanding of science in the House, but it is one step which I think is very necessary. I am sorry to give such a long comment on it but I feel very strongly about it, as you can see.

**Mr Batiste**

37. I go along completely with the comment you made, particularly bearing in mind the fact that most Members of the House of Commons have no scientific background of any kind at all, and therefore it is extraordinarily valuable to be able to get assessments that really provide a technological base that we could not provide for ourselves or a technical judgment which we could not provide for ourselves. It seems to me though that what Mr McFall was saying was that there is no distinction between what the Library can do to supply us with that and what you can do to supply us with that, whereas the Library is producing its reports on an informed layman's view or even an informed specialist view in the published papers and you are going to be a platform or front for the plea for objective opinions free of charge and that, therefore, one of the great arguments in favour of this is a very substantial sum of additio

27 January 1992/

LORD KENNEDD, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

[Continued]

[Mr Batiste *Contd*]

budget that you provide. It may be difficult for you to put a figure to this, but it seems to me, looking for example at the 1990 budget as a year that is completed where your expenditure was of the order of £89,000, I would guess that that actually provided, if one were looking at Select Committee rates for outside advisers, a very substantial additional sum on top of that in terms of the advice that had been given from people of very considerable eminence around the country. I think the additionality argument on the way POST operates should not be lost sight of. How much are we talking about? What is the ballpark area? Are we talking about one for one or better than that, or what?

(Dr Norton) I think I would have to answer, Chairman. I am the one who has to ask these eminent people to spend their weekends and afternoons either providing or vetting something. I would find it very difficult to be quantitative but it is a substantial additionality, as Mr Batiste says, and I can only operate in terms of times rather than salaries because I am sure consultants' rates would be quite high. We often involve between 10 and 20 fairly expert and knowledgeable individuals in a briefing note because of the need to cover all the aspects that are related to that particular policy issue. So that even if we only required two or three hours of someone's time, that would still add up to be quite a substantial commitment by the community outside. I have never found very much hesitation, it has been about 5 per cent of the requests that has met with any resistance at all. Normally as soon as the individuals know you are preparing a briefing for Parliament, they want to do everything they can to help you get it right. So we have not had much resistance on that. I would hope that would also survive the transition from our being a charity constitutionally to our being a properly constituted parliamentary body.

## Mr Bennett

38. I come back to Sir Gerard on this question. He made a very good case for a lobby for science, if you like. I accept that argument, but I am not quite sure whether Parliament should be expected to pay for it. On our earlier questions there was this denial that you were a pressure group or lobby for the science interest in the country. Which is it? Is it really that you want to be lobbying to pre-empt Members of Parliament to spend more time looking at scientific issues or are you really trying to be in some way objective?

(Sir Gerard Vaughan) Certainly I would not want to see POST as a lobby for outside lobbies, if I can put that first. I think that would be an appalling situation and very misleading for Members. But I had seen it as potentially a very valuable tool to enable Members to do their job better in this field, which I think is going to be a field of increasing importance. As a tool you can argue it should be funded by ourselves just as much as the Library and other services are funded for helping us to do our job more effectively. That is an answer to your question.

(Professor Sir Hans Kornberg) I wonder if I might come in here as a card-carrying scientist. There are two aspects to the questions which were raised. A lobby for science usually means that it is scientists who feel that their work is not sufficiently valued and so we look to Parliament or whoever dispenses public funds to give more money for the pursuit of science. This is not our case. Our case is that we feel that science and the appreciation of science and technology issues underlies almost everything that we do and will increasingly do so in an increasingly complex civilisation and will certainly underlie much of the legislation that you will produce. It was, in fact, those thoughts which were before the trustees of the Nuffield Committee when we were first asked whether we would be willing to support POST. We felt that the means of information and understanding of general scientific questions which was available to Members of Parliament was, as Sir Gerard rightly said, quite insufficient, especially when compared with the kind of information and support which is available to our colleagues in Europe and our colleagues in the United States. It is for that reason that we decided that for a limited time we would devote funds to setting up POST on the strict understanding that if Parliament then decided they did not want it, the experiment had failed and we would write it off. If Parliament decided that it was useful and they would like to continue with it, we would say, "Wonderful, we have done something useful. We have primed the pump," but again we have no means of continuing the funding and this comes back to a particular point you raised earlier, namely, there is no suggestion that the private granting agencies could continue to fund POST, but we do hope, having cast our bread upon the waters, it will neither sink nor come back soggy.

## Mr McFall

39. Sir Hans, I could not agree more about the appreciation of science and technology issues, so you have a friend in that, but I am afraid I would have the same response as Mrs Thatcher had in 1986 in saying it should not come from public funds on the limited case that you have made today on that. In questioning it has been thrown out that there has been a substantial additionality. Many scientists have given up their time; they are at the forefront of technology and this information is available to us. I would like, for a better appreciation, to receive a briefing paper from yourself or extra information which can convey that to me so that I can then tell my colleagues in the House, like the rest, that this is a valuable addition, but as it exists at the present time I am afraid that the overlap between the Library and yourselves is there and I would like further information on that.<sup>1</sup>

(Lord Kennet) I do not know if this would be a convenient moment to go over to the actual structure which we have halfway proposed to you

<sup>1</sup>See Appendix 15, p. 54.

27 January 1992]

LORD KENNEDY, MR J COUSINS, MP,

SIR GERARD VAUGHAN, MP,

PROFESSOR SIR HANS KORNBERG, FRS and DR M NORTON

[Continued]

[Mr McFall *Contd*]

and would like to say some more about, because this is the very means of avoiding the overlap. Would that be all right?

## Chairman

40. Yes.

(*Lord Kennet*) We have had long discussions about the fact that, "Okay, so we want to be part of the Parliamentary structure but what do we mean? Where would we like to fit in?" What we have proposed to you is best shown on a chart, of which we have copies here and which, I regret to say, you have not yet seen. I apologise to you for the fact that it was not perfected in time to get it to you a few days before this meeting but perhaps we could hand it to you now and then we could discuss it.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, let me say something about corresponding outfits abroad because it does bear on the funding question which we have been discussing. We have got hold of the figures *per capita* for parliamentary technology assessment in the countries which have them. They are Denmark, the Netherlands, the United States, Germany, France and ourselves. The Dutch one is a little bit out of line because it is funded by the executive, but it is still the parliamentary technology shop which reports to Parliament. The figures are as follows: per head of population Denmark spends 19.2p, the Netherlands, 9.15p, the United States, 5.2p, Germany, 1.75p, France, 1.1p, the United Kingdom, at the moment 0.4p, and if you were to adopt our proposed level of funding that would rise to 0.9p *per capita*, so that is still behind the lowest existing one anywhere else in the democratic world. To turn now to the chart, you will see that at the top of the page is the House of Commons Information Committee. Assuming that the POST Board keeps its present composition of a parliamentary majority, which we are very sure is the right thing to do, and the existing division of Members between the House of Commons and House of Lords, then the Commons Members should be appointed by your Committee, Mr Chairman, and the Lords Members should be appointed by the Science and Technology Select Committee of the House of Lords. That leaves the non-parliamentary members, the scientific and engineering members, who we believe should be co-opted by the Parliamentary Members of the POST Board, with the advice of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. The POST Board would

then direct the operations of POST itself, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. The House of Commons Information Committee and the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee would exercise a general supervision, a structural supervision, and review the financial needs and indeed, the operations of POST at stated intervals, perhaps annually, but, of course, that would be a matter for the two committees. This would preserve the existing structure of the governing board of the office in POST, which has worked well, but would bring it under direct parliamentary control and make it a—I hesitate to use the word but you can see what it would make it; it is a sort of a joint sub-committee of select committees in the Houses of Parliament.

## Mr Batiste

41. Is there anywhere any thought about how the select committees might be brought more into the structure, so that, for example, a representative of the Liaison Committee is one of the parliamentary members on the committee?

(*Lord Kennet*) We thought about that and we did think that it would certainly be a cleaner, simpler, more manageable structure if the POST Board reported to the most relevant committee and to that committee alone in each House. Of course, your own Select Committee could, if it wished, consult other committees about people to suggest. We do not envisage that the membership of the POST Board should be limited to the membership of your Committee but that you would be able to propose members of other committees or, indeed, other parliamentarians altogether.

## Chairman

42. Can I thank you, Lord Kennet, and your colleagues very much. You have been here much longer than maybe we thought, because I think you will find that politicians do tend to talk a great deal. My father always said, "The trouble with politicians is that once they stand up they forget to sit down." We have not stood up here at all but we have learned a great deal from you today and it is has been very valuable and we are very grateful to you for the time you have taken in preparing your document and answering our questions today. Thank you very much.

(*Lord Kennet*) Thank you very much, chairman, on our behalf.

<sup>1</sup>See Appendix 1 p. 38.

27 January 1992]

[Continued]

**Memorandum submitted by the Librarian (INF/5)****POST AND LIBRARY SERVICES**

1. On 24 July 1991 the House of Commons Commission decided that the question of funding the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), including the "co-ordination of such a service with those already provided by the Library", should be considered by the new Information Committee. This submission describes briefly the current services of the Library Research Section dealing with Science and Technology, and addresses the question of how development of these briefing services for Members, which are in growing demand, could be co-ordinated with those of POST most effectively and without duplication of public expenditure.

2. The Science Section in the Research Division of the Library was originally established in 1966, in response to Members' requests for more information and research on scientific issues and their implications for public policy. Like other research sections, it deals with a growing volume of enquiries from individual Members requiring written replies (1,279 in 1990) and at the same time provides papers on science-related topics of public and parliamentary concern. Recently reorganised as the Science and Environment Section, it is currently the smallest research section, with an establishment of three research posts and four library professional and support staff. Scientific qualifications currently held in the Section are: BA, pure and applied biology, PhD geology, BSc chemistry, MB, BS (fully qualified medical practitioner).

3. Papers produced recently are listed, with brief descriptions, in Annex A. The Section's papers cover both scientific questions and the legislative and political background, which is likely to be of particular interest to Members. They therefore tend to cover more ground and to be somewhat longer than the "Briefing Notes" that have been issued by POST; but shorter "briefing" type papers can be produced where appropriate and desired by Members.

4. The Science and Environment Section is further responsible for maintaining the Library's resource base in its subject areas. This includes substantial holdings of books, specialist periodicals, parliamentary papers, press notices and other public documentation. All this material is analysed within the section and references input to the POLIS computer database. Library resources on science and technology maintained in this way can be made promptly available to Members and their staff, through consultation in the Members' and Derby Gate Libraries, in replies to Members' enquiries, and through Research papers.

5. A staff costing of the Science and Environment Section is given in Annex B. As explained above this covers staff responsible both for research output and for the processing of the Library's holdings of scientific material. Staff costs of the section for 1991-92 total £142,306 (including National Insurance).

6. POST, in its proposals for public funding, has pointed to the model of the US Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) and similar bodies in other countries. These organisations provide "technology assessment" in the form of substantial, authoritative reports which draw on expert opinion to assess options in controversial science and technology questions. Such assessments are of course already made in various forms in this country in academic studies, science journalism and the work of research bodies. But a publicly funded service of technology assessment could constitute a valuable new primary source of information for Members and Parliamentary Committees.

7. POST is in a position to draw on the knowledge of its Members, and on its industrial and academic contacts, as well as to sub-contract to established scientists for particular projects. The Library does not have funds to commission outside reports, unlike some other parliamentary research services. The Committee may feel that the new dimension to research support for Members offered by POST consists particularly in its ability to commission original work from experts, and in the possibility of developing a programme of substantial "technology assessments".

8. So far as the shorter-term "briefing" function is concerned, both the Library and POST have been active in this field. It is in this area that concern arises about duplication of publicly funded work. The Library Science and Environment Section is well placed to provide briefing services to Members, and the addition of a single researcher (Assistant Library Clerk) to its establishment would make possible a substantial and sustained increase in output of briefing papers, for which there is an evident and increasing demand from Members. This would be a productive application of public funds to an established service under the immediate control of Members.

9. Library research staff are very much in touch with Members' concerns through their daily work of answering individual enquiries. The knowledge and morale of staff are supported by the combination of this work for individual Members and the writing of briefing papers. Our authors are accustomed to: adapting papers very closely to the needs, interests and timescale of Members; producing papers very quickly, as is often necessary; co-operating with other research specialists, e.g., economists—many scientific and technological issues involve several subject fields—and drawing on the whole resources of the Library; and themselves being available on the spot to deal with follow-up enquiries.

27 January 1992]

[Continued]

10. The Library believes that the strengthening at library clerk level of this central in-House briefing capacity would be a cost-effective response to Members' needs, and at the same time complement the development of technology assessment and commissioned work by POST. In the United States the OTA and the Congressional Research Service have arrangements for mutual notification of forthcoming projects. Contacts are already maintained between POST and the Library and these could be reinforced with a view to avoiding overlap.

11. The question of Scientific and Technological research support for Members at Westminster was considered in a report on "Science Advice to the Congress" submitted by Dr Rhodri Walters, an officer of the House of Lords, in May 1991 to the Clerk of the Parliaments and the Nuffield and Leverhulme Travelling Fellowship Committee. Annex C reproduces an extract from this Report.

18 November 1991

## ANNEX A

## PAPERS BY THE SCIENTIFIC SECTION SINCE JANUARY 1990

This list includes notes on the scientific content of the papers, where relevant.

(a) *Research Notes* (short papers)

- (1) *Transport of Farm Animals and EC Draft 7871/89* (90/2)
- (2) *Benefits for Nuclear Test Veterans* (90/13)
- (3) *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill* (90/23)
- (4) *Ivory Trade* (90/26)

This paper looks at the population management and trade aspects of endangered species conservation.

- (5) *Dogs and Dog Registration* (90/31)
- (6) *The Ozone Layer, the Montreal Protocol and Beyond* (90/42)

This paper describes the science of ozone layer destruction and the range of harmful effects anticipated as a consequence of increased levels of ultraviolet radiation reaching the earth's surface.

- (7) *Computer Misuse* (90/58)

This paper explains the nature of computer viruses and how, in general terms, a "hacker" gains access to a computer, as well as the background to the changes in the law introduced by the Computer Misuse Act 1990.

- (8) *Coal Mining Subsidence Bill* (91/5)
- (9) *The British Technology Group* (91/7)

This note describes the work of BTG, highlighting some of the difficulties of technology transfer.

- (10) *The Abortion Bill RU 486* (91/8)

This paper discusses the scientific and medical issues surrounding the licensing of RU 486 in the UK, including how the drug works, the results of clinical trials, and research into other (non-abortion related) issues.

- (11) *Science Funding and Scientific Manpower* (91/10)

The first section examines allegations of inadequate funding for scientific research, with particular emphasis on the 1991-2 budget. The second section looks at the causes of scientific manpower shortages, with comments on science education and furthering public understanding science issues.

- (12) *Natural Heritage (Scotland) Bill* (91/13)
- (13) *The Piper Alpha Disaster and the Cullen Report* (91/19)
- (14) *Dogs* (91/36)
- (15) *The MacSharry Plan to Reform the Common Agricultural Policy* (91/44)
- (16) *Competition and Services (Utilities Bill)* (91/55)

(b) *Background Papers* (longer papers)

- (1) *Nuclear Power* (268) (in collaboration with the Economic Affairs Section)

This paper discusses a range of policy issues concerning nuclear power. The Science and Environment Section part covers three topics. First, it deals with radioactive waste disposal, including some of the scientific issues related to disposal sites (particularly the geology and ground water movement) and examines the likely future of spent fuel reprocessing. Second, it examines with figures the potential contribution of nuclear power towards slowing the increase in carbon dioxide emissions. Third, it discusses the leukaemia clusters around Sellafield, Dounreay and elsewhere. Statistical analysis is discussed which suggests that the clusters cannot be due to chance, and Martin Gardner's work in identifying a link between exposure of fathers to radiation and contraction of leukaemia in their children is explained.

27 January 1992]

[Continued]

(2) *The Regulation of Privatised Utility Companies* (273) (in collaboration with the Economic Affairs Section)

(c) *Reference Sheets* (covering legislation)

- (1) *The Environmental Protection Bill* (90/2)
- (2) *The Food Safety Bill* (90/6)
- (3) *The Planning and Compensation Bill* (91/4)

## ANNEX B

*Science and Environment Section  
Staff costs (1991-92 figures)*

|  | £ per<br>annum |
|--|----------------|
| 1 Head of Section (Deputy Assistant Librarian)     | 36,471         |
| 1 Researcher (full-time) (Assistant Library Clerk) | 19,680         |
| 2 Part-time researchers (Assistant Library Clerks) | 21,994         |
| 1 Higher Library Executive                         | 20,462         |
| 1 Library Executive                                | 13,949         |
| 1 Senior Office Clerk                              | 14,014         |
| 1 Secretary  | 15,736         |
| <b>Total</b>                                       | <b>142,306</b> |

## ANNEX C

Report by Dr Rhodri Walters, an officer of the House of Lords, on "Science Advice to the Congress", May 1991 (submitted to Clerk of the Parliaments and Civil Service Nuffield and Leverhulme Travelling Fellowship Committee, 1989-90). In the final section of his report Dr Walters considers choices for the UK Parliament. He is sceptical about a publicly funded Technology Assessment service, but on the question of briefing notes reaches conclusions similar to those of this submission. He writes [p. 44]:

*"Briefing Notes"*

Briefing notes could as easily be produced from within Parliament, using existing facilities, were resources available. The House of Commons Library is the obvious focus for such a service. At present the Science and Environment section—numbering three Library Clerk equivalents and three support staff—find themselves overwhelmed with answering inquiries from Members. Research notes or reference sheets on bills can be produced only with considerable additional effort on the part of staff. But a small addition in staff resources and the exercise of greater discrimination in the work that is undertaken (with the possible assistance of some kind of liaison group which included members of the House and representatives of Committees) could produce a quite disproportionately large benefit. The House of Commons Library, after all, has at its disposal far greater facilities and access to far greater accumulations of material than any outside agency could be expected to have except at disproportionate cost. It might also be possible to engage temporary specialist staff on fellowship schemes to augment the efforts of the Library Clerks."

**Examination of Witnesses**

MR DERMOT ENGLEFIELD, Librarian, MR CHRISTOPHER BARCLAY, Head of Science and Environment Section, and MISS NICOLA DONLON, House of Commons Library, called in and examined.

**Chairman**

43. Mr Englefield, would you be good enough to introduce your colleagues?

(*Mr Englefield*) Mr Christopher Barclay who is head of the Science and Environment section is on my right and Miss Nicola Donlon, on my left, has for the last three years been very much in the firing line with regard to work for Members in that section.

44. Mr Englefield, you have been sitting through the previous session and no doubt you heard a lot of the questions and problems that people have felt there were with some sort of overlap between POST and the Library. We do appreciate the valuable

service that is provided for Members by the Library in general and by the Science and Environment section in particular. If POST had not been invented, would you want to promote the creation of a body of that kind? For example, are there things POST can do which the Library cannot do?

(*Mr Englefield*) May I start, Mr Chairman, by just saying a word about the origins of the Science and Environment section of the Library. It was started in 1966 at the same time as the Science and Technology Committee was set up and the fact that we are looking at it 25 years later in the context of POST, suggests that the House was very wise at that time to consider something along the lines which, in

27 January 1992]

MR D ENGLEFIELD,  
MR C BARCLAY and  
MISS N DONLON

[Continued]

[Chairman *Contd*]

fact, were established. The level of work and the form to work which the Scientific section, which is not called the Science and Environment section, does in the Library matches that of other research sections. It is one of six sections really covering the whole of the research information that Members require. It therefore serves all the 650 Members as individuals and it offers a service to the House through the preparation of background papers for distribution to all Members. It co-operates with other parts of the Research Division when it wishes to write one of these papers, if appropriate with an economist, a statistician, a lawyer, etc. It has itself very considerable library resources built up over this long period and maintained sharp and up-to-date by professional library staff. It also obviously has access to the other Library sources. That is why in our paper<sup>1</sup> we suggest that, should Members feel that there is a need for more papers, then something like one further library clerk would increase our output considerably because of the, as it were, capital we already have invested in these resources. If the House is seeking support for technology assessment, then I think that it is quite likely that an organisation such as POST might well be appropriate. I would assume that that work would be more long-term, would require wider consultation frequently with scientists actually at the cutting edge of technology, which is not always easy for Library staff to achieve, although I am sure Nicola Donlon will be able to tell you the sort of sources which she uses. POST might, of course, have funds—even considerable funds—for commissioning work outside and, although some parliamentary libraries have such funds (in Australia, for instance) it has never been part of the Westminster tradition to do so. So I think that there is a role for two organisations provided there are very clear terms of reference as to the work which each one does.

## Mr Waller

45. It was suggested during the evidence we heard earlier that POST had an advantage in the sense that it was able to go to its many contacts in the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee and get information to an extent and breadth perhaps not available to the Library staff. Would you like to comment on that point?

(*Mr Englefield*) Might I ask my colleagues to comment on the nuts and bolts of it? They are doing it, it is better for the Committee to hear it from them.

(*Mr Barclay*) Perhaps I could just say a word about the papers we write, the short briefs we try to produce, the key being to be of use to Members of Parliament. We use printed material, Select Committee reports, Government reports, journals including learned journals, and a limited amount of consultation with outside experts. It is limited partly because we have to be basically in the building to be available to answer inquiries from Members of Parliament. Obviously we do go out, we do go to

training courses, we go to visit people, but there are limitations to the extent that we can do it. Having said that, a great deal of material is published; basically scientists publish their results and these are available and we do consult them. We also have access to journals such as "New Scientist" which produce, as it were, surveys in which they have journalists who go round talking to scientists asking what they are doing. We have access to all this information and we certainly do contact scientists outside, mainly by telephone. I think perhaps Nicola Donlon may wish to say more about that.

(*Miss Donlon*) One advantage of the approach we use is that we can provide a speedy response which is often demanded by the parliamentary timetable, so that, for example, when producing papers on Bills, they often have to be written over several days in order to meet the timetable imposed by Second Reading debate. Another example is the Library paper on Scientific Funding and Science Manpower which was produced in three working days to meet the deadline of the debate on Science Policy held on 6 February 1991. One reason why consultation with experts is kept to the extent that it is, is that we only feel we use them where we cannot get the answer from published sources. Researchers are primarily doing research; we do not wish to distract them from their work when we know we can get the answer from somewhere else. Sometimes they are not able to give an answer in the time that we have available to write a paper or give a response to Members' individual inquiries, and sometimes they want to be a bit cautious about giving information to us over the telephone, or they want to review the paper before we put it out for publication. We do not really like that option because we feel it jeopardises our independence to write our opinion on the information available.

## Mr Batiste

46. It follows very much from that, that you do not have to sell the value of the Library services to people sitting in this room. We all admire the extraordinary speed and facility with which you give us the information we need or try to examine. Where there is something on top of that, that is difficult for you to provide and that is something POST could provide for us. You have described accurately how you obtain the papers and put the papers together and said very revealingly, and quite rightly, you want to preserve your objectivity, your own opinions, on much of the information you are gathering. What we rather gathered from POST was that what they could do on the basis of underlying assessment technology was to bring together some 20 people, I think was the example they gave, at the cutting edge of a particular subject, giving three or four hours apiece to ensure that the paper in all its aspects represented the state of the art as far as they were concerned, and probably representing their own opinions quite strongly within that, though they would argue they were objective, and the person bringing the paper together as a whole would

<sup>1</sup>See p. 00.

27 January 1992]

MR D ENGLEFIELD,  
MR C BARCLAY and  
MISS N DONLON

[Continued]

[Mr Batiste *Contd*]

endeavour to push that objectivity as well. There was, as it were, a very large element of additionality in what they could produce over and above what it was suggested the Library could produce. Would that be essentially fair?

(*Mr Barclay*) We believe that for longer studies that is true and it is a very good way of working. It is not something that we have done or have any plans to do, because of the constraints on our work, because we have not got the money and so on. So yes, for a major study—and POST have done two particular ones, one on high-performance computing, which uses that method, and one on the defence industry, the use of defence technology, which made very good use of outside experts, and that is just the sort of thing we cannot do—we welcome it. We do not want to create the impression in what we say of being against the idea of technology assessment. It is a very exciting idea. It is a fact that we are in the business of providing information to Members of Parliament and we welcome any extension of the information which is available to Members of Parliament. So for the major studies we think, yes, that is something we could not do and we very much welcome it. We feel, however, if you are talking only about a four-page briefing note, given the general constraints upon resources for information for Members of Parliament, it is more appropriate to do it the way we do it, the quick way of doing it, basically from published sources, just for the sort of things we do, and to concentrate POST's resources on the major studies which we could not do, which are very important. It is a completely new service which we entirely welcome and we hope to use it as well. It is enormously useful all-round.

47. Where you are producing your results from the published sources, because it is a request from the House, you are looking for the overlap. You must exercise, I suppose, an element of prioritisation. If a Member comes to you and says, "Look, I have this debate in two days' time and I am going to make a speech and need to have some background information," you pull together the resources and give them a letter of four, five or six pages on the subject they are specifically interested in from published sources. The POST approach on the same thing seems to me to be a bit different in the sense that they will apparently—and this is what they did—rather than just publish existing sources and leave it to Members to make up their own mind, make their own valuation of published sources and perhaps bring other people in. Is that not something different and useful?

(*Mr Barclay*) You described quite accurately the difference between POST briefing notes and our letters but our method for papers is slightly different. On the papers, we aim, as an approximate rule of thumb, for about five person working days. They would take a longer period if there were other distractions, but that sort of time. If we have a week we would do one of our briefs. We would choose them often with a subject where we had had information, say a subject we think is going to come

up for Members of Parliament. My colleague, Nicola Donlon, might wish to say more but we are making an element of discrimination between what people have written but also trying to put both points of view. For example, at the moment I am writing something about farming and the environment, the problem of reforms to farming and how it is going to affect the environment. I do not want at the end of it to produce a simple note. I am going to say what the Friends of the Earth say and what the Government has said and what the Royal Agricultural Society has said and put this so that Members can see the different opinions to some extent and choose between them.

(*Miss Donlon*) It seems you were suggesting perhaps that POST had an extra layer of interpretation of sources they use and we can do that if it is not going to prejudice our objectivity. Sometimes it is more a form of explaining what is meant and what are the implications of a particular source of information, so we do not just say, "One side says this, one side says that." We also say the reason they are saying it. We try to give that sort of interpretation, but then will not come to conclusions; we very much leave that for the Member who is reading the paper to do that.

## Mr Waller

48. In your memorandum you refer to the limitations imposed by shortages of staff time, which we obviously understand. If you had available to you the extra resources that are discussed by POST and which we have heard about this afternoon, would your priorities be similar to or different from those expressed by POST, as you have understood they express them?

(*Mr Englefield*) No, I think they would not be particularly similar. We are faced with about 1,200 enquiries a year from Members and that is in a sense really our first job. Secondly, we do prepare papers, as has been mentioned, and we believe we have the resources, that is, the section has in its holdings, etc., to prepare more of those papers with comparatively little increase in staff. We would not be moving into the area called technology assessment at all.

49. But POST says it would need a considerable increase in resources to go on further into the area of technology assessment. If we were talking about those sorts of resources which are used at present by POST, would your priority be the publication of more papers, which is what POST is concentrating on at present, or the ability to provide a more effective *ad hoc* service to Members, which is what you do particularly and which is one of your great strengths at present?

(*Mr Englefield*) I think if they were to get resources these should be aimed at technology assessment, one might say almost exclusively, because one thing is that this Committee will need to assess in two or three years, whatever it is, what Members are getting for their money, assuming the thing is set up, and I think it would be very

27 January 1992]

MR D ENGLEFIELD,  
MR C BARCLAY and  
MISS N DONLON

[Continued]

[Mr Waller *Contd*]

important for the Committee to be able to say, "We gave this new body this job to do in that area, quite distinct from the Library. Let us see how they have done it." So what we are trying to do all the time is to define two quite clear jobs and I think both the Library and POST need very clear terms of reference, not least for the Committee to make its judgment.

## Mr Bennett

50. Are you really convinced that you need two set-ups? It seems to me that their briefing notes are not as good as the Library briefing notes and they are not particularly good value for money considering the amount of resources they have to produce them compared to the Library. So I would feel it would be a mistake for them to go on producing their briefing notes. Therefore the one area where it seems to me they have a separate issue is technology assessment, but if they were only going to produce probably four or five a year, they could end up with a very big structure to produce fairly small returns. Could the Library commission from outside groups four or five technology assessments a year and, therefore, get much better value for money because the money would be spent basically on the technology assessment rather than a structure to set that up?

(*Mr Englefield*) As I mentioned, so far at Westminster there has not been any idea that the Library should have funds to commission work from the outside. There are times—and I have not given much thought to this area but let us say health, for the sake of argument, or transport—where if there were funds it might be quite effective to commission research done outside and other Parliaments have done this. But I have to be frank. We at the moment do not have it within our terms of reference and I have not thought through the implications of changing this way of dealing with research by adding a new dimension to deal with research which would involve commissioning it from outside.

51. The model they put to us is that there should be the Library and there should be POST. The alternative is that there is the Library, of which a subsection is POST, organised in some way or other?

(*Mr Englefield*) I cannot help being conscious all the time that if this is done for science and technology, might this Committee with myself sitting here in a year's time be looking at the area of transport and a year later the area of education, whatever it is, so that the idea of bringing this within the Library Department I think has very wide implications about the actual terms of reference, what the Library is about. As I said at the very beginning, this section, the Science and Environment section, is working with the same philosophy at the same level as the whole six research sections.

52. The Select Committees can commission research. Certainly the Health and Social Services Committee has commissioned research in the past. Might that be a different matter?

(*Mr Englefield*) It might be that the idea of POST would fit better into that system, again provided that we are not going to get any overlap in the work being done.

## Sir Ian Lloyd

53. Mr Chairman, I think it is really incumbent on me to say straight away I fully share everything that has been said this afternoon about the immense value of the services provided by the Library which I have used for many, many years, but what I really did want to put to Mr Englefield is this. When we looked at the relationship between, if you like, the various science support arms of the Congress, which was the original stimulus behind the formation of POST, speaking from memory, we discovered there were essentially four major scientific sections: the Library of Congress, the Congressional Research Service, what I think is called the Office of the Budget or something like that, and finally the OTA. Again speaking from memory, I think we discovered the science resources of those four organisations alone amounted to 8,000 people. We also discovered that the relationship between those four seemed to be determined—not entirely determined, but essentially determined—on a time basis, in the sense that the Library of Congress told us they preferred not to deal with inquiries which took up more than three days to a week, the Congressional Research Service said they preferred to deal with inquiries which took perhaps a week to three months, and the OTA in essence said "We prefer to deal with the major inquiries which we know cannot be done in under six months but which we hope can be completed in the lifetime of a Congress"—which is two years. In that context, what I really want to put to you is this: when you suggested in your paper that you could meet much of what you perceive to be a new demand with one additional library clerk, I felt it was a most remarkably optimistic figure, and perhaps reflected a view of the demand for science and technology in our Parliament which may be different from what I perceive. I want to quote to you, if I may, from a paper which has just been produced by a Counsellor in our own Embassy in Washington which says, "There appears to have been a considerable improvement in recent years in the quality of advice on science and technology reaching the President and in the calibre of some of the key committees on the Hill". My impression was that the rise in the calibre of these committees on the Hill and their ability to challenge the executive, the President with his massive scientific advice machine, were very largely dependent not only on the Congressional Research Service, the Library of Congress and so on, but in particular in the last ten years on these very thorough, very often profound, technology assessments produced by the OTA. To that extent I am very largely in agreement with you:

27 January 1992]

MR D ENGLEFIELD,  
MR C BARCLAY and  
MISS N DONLON

[Continued]

[Sir Ian Lloyd *Contd*]

our aim as I saw it when we set out on this experiment was to try to demonstrate that technology research was possible in the United Kingdom Parliament, was desirable and certainly could be done on a much more economic basis and to some extent—if I can put it to you this way—the production of the briefing papers was almost an accidental start in that it was a response to those who were funding the experiment who felt we could not say “Wait for two years before we show you anything at all”. They said we must do something now and to some extent that is why the briefing papers were produced. Paradoxically those briefing papers seem to have acquired not only in the United Kingdom but abroad a popularity which has surprised everybody. What this is due to I think Sir Hans Kornberg is in a far better position to answer than myself, but I would have thought—and I put to you—there is considerable scope for a clear, properly defined definition between the organisation which is to do technology assessment as its major purpose in life and perhaps enhancement of the Library in the way you described, perhaps very, very modestly to take over or perhaps improve the range, scope or whatever it is of the science and technology papers which you do so well.

(*Mr Englefield*) Yes, Sir Ian, I agree entirely. Going back to your very first point about Congress, your analysis is totally accurate. I had it all confirmed at a meeting that I had with the Deputy Director of the Congressional Research Service in Moscow, of all places, and I put to him the sort of thing that was likely to happen here and he nodded and said, “Yes, that did trouble one of the appropriations committees”—in other words, they were concerned about the expenditure of money. What they did was touched on in the memorandum here. They suggested that one of the scientists—I dare say the head of their science section, as it were—should be a member of the Valuation Board, I think they call it, of the Office of Technological Assessment. I understand that works very well. They tell each other what they are going to do and blow a whistle if there seems to be any sort of confusion. The bid was characteristically modest, but I think that one of our witnesses this afternoon did point out exactly what you say, that these briefing papers were a starting throw. I mean, they put something up in the sky so that people could see they were around, but I think really that the way in which that work overlaps with the Library work really does not need to be looked at and that POST itself needs to concentrate on the real new issues which we frankly say neither in size nor in the sort of tempo at which we work are particularly suitable vehicles for us. So essentially what you are saying I would agree with very much. I do not know whether Mr Barclay would like to add a word.

(*Mr Barclay*) Yes, I also agree with everything Sir Ian said. The idea of one person dealing with this was specifically linked to producing more short papers. We reckon with one extra person we could make a definite commitment to produce two short pages on scientific topics every month, except during

the summer recess. That is a definite commitment we could make, given the sort of way we write papers, the sort of timescale and the fact that it integrates with our normal inquiry work. We are often doing similar things in letters to Members; therefore, we can use the material for papers. We are certainly not trying to say that is all Members need or that is all Members deserve. No, I think the idea of more technology assessment is a very exciting idea and in a sense we would feel that there the resources should be dedicated to it. I suppose one way you could put it is that the Library always has to be careful not to spend all its time just answering inquiries from Members; it has to be careful to keep time for its papers and the management tasks it has. In a sense I suppose we feel with POST it is important that they keep their time for their big studies and do not get bogged down in doing something relatively similar to what we can do. It is not going to change the world very much if they produce a lot more briefing notes, whereas the big studies are really the things that can make a difference and, as Sir Ian suggested, can challenge the Government in the field of scientific resources and offer original, different opinions. We can bring facts to the attention of Members of Parliament but we cannot challenge something. If, say, the Department of the Environment has produced a study saying something, we could bring to Members' attention the fact that somebody has put forward different views but a new technology assessment body might be able to produce its own study and say, “The Government has said that and we have done our own study. It has taken us two months to do it, or whatever, and on our work we conclude something very different.” That is way beyond us and that is the other side of the river to which we would not go.

**Mr McFall**

54. We have had some witnesses this afternoon telling us what the advantages of POST are for the Library service, and you are telling us now that with an extra clerk it would lead to a significant increase in the number of scientific papers. I thought it was about the issue of whether we should have two organisations or one organisation. It seems to me that we are going along the lines that it is two organisations with extra resources in each, but let us say you have this extra member of staff, how will that impinge on the work of POST with regard to, say, their 20 or 30 briefing papers? Would you say your extra staff would work along with POST and they could be joint papers?

(*Mr Englefield*) That would be possible. It think I would see it that, given the sort of capital already in the section, including its resources, that other person whose main job was to produce papers would produce quick results for essentially the same capital and also there would be a different discipline to be recruited, so it would improve the total range of disciplines available within the section. For instance, one of our staff is a doctor and, therefore, we would

27 January 1992]

MR D ENGLEFIELD,  
MR C BARCLAY and  
MISS N DONLON

[Continued]

[Mr McFall *Contd*]

expect that person—and she does—to produce papers of a high medical standard. She also, of course, has experience of working in hospitals and, therefore, somebody not working in Mr Barclay's section, somebody dealing with the health service, would be able to consult her as somebody who actually has experience of how the health service works. So if we were to have another Library clerk, if that is the Committee's idea, then clearly the disciplines would be increased and the total pool available from the scientific section and available when the House is sitting and throughout the year to come and talk to you, because it is all here, would be increased and that obviously *in toto* would be of greater value to the House.

(*Mr Barclay*) Could I add one point on what you said at the beginning, do we envisage joint papers. We have not really thought about that but would definitely hope to co-operate. The last thing we would want—we are all going to be fairly small anyway—it is crazy to have a situation where you have two organisations which are not subject to each other and would say, "We will not deal with them". We would very much hope to co-operate. We are in the business of providing information for Members of Parliament and we want to do the best for them. Therefore, we want to co-operate with them and have a good relationship with them and to work together to sort things out, which is best for Members of Parliament and perhaps affects slightly something Mr Waller said earlier, would it be our priority to do so. So some extent it is your priority. We are doing things because Members want them. We react when Members ask us specific enquiries and we do papers on subjects which we think are of interest to Members and take note of their reaction to it. So it is very much our job to do what you want, to provide the service Members of Parliament want, and not to have our own vision of something quite different we ought to be doing.

55. Perhaps it is outwith our remit but is there a case where you and POST can get together and present a paper to us as to how best to use both resources?

(*Mr Englefield*) Certainly, if the Committee requests a paper like that we should get down to preparing it.<sup>1</sup>

#### Mr Batiste

56. Two very short points: the first is one that has been answered in terms of your interaction with POST. Would you see yourself usefully having

representation on the POST committee, and secondly, assuming that you both produced a short four-page summary on the same subject, how would you perceive that the different approaches of POST and the Library would result in a difference in the article at the end of the day?

(*Mr Englefield*) Could I answer the very first question about somebody on the POST Board. Yes, if I was asked I would nominate Mr Barclay of the Science and Environment Section.

(*Mr Barclay*) I think that would help but would not in itself solve the problems of overlap obviously, particularly as the main body is going to be a large body of members overseeing POST, and just one member of the Library staff would be in a weak position. As to the approaches in the papers, we do not see that there is a substantial difference. You could certainly find individual papers by the Library which are different from the approach in individual papers by POST. That is undoubtedly true, but both ranges of papers have gone on to some subjects which are more technically scientific than others. POST has written on science education, on Antarctica, on population growth indeed—on things where it is not just a question of explaining what has come out of the lab. It is true that we do do papers on legislation and, of course, some legislation has quite a big scientific content, like the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, but if it was on a scientific topic, we think the difference would actually be very small.

(*Miss Donlon*) Just to reinforce what Mr Barclay has said, on the point about a four-page paper, your main constraint is getting a lot of information into that short space and the principal difference you might expect is that at the moment we emphasise in our note the references we have used, so that might take up an extra page, but if we were talking about four sides of solid text on the subject, I do not think there would be a difference because at that sort of level the approach we use which is published sources and limited consultation with experts would produce the same sort of results.

#### Chairman

57. Can I thank you very much. Is there anything you would like to add, Mr Englefield?

(*Mr Englefield*) I do not think so, except that obviously from this afternoon's discussions both institutions, or the proposed POST and the Library Research Section, we do need to have fairly clear terms of reference, I think, not least so that you can assess POST at the end of the day and, indeed, assess our work.

**Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed.

<sup>1</sup>See Annex to the report.

# APPENDICES TO THE MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

## APPENDIX 1

### Further Memorandum submitted by POST (INF/24)

#### OPTIONS FOR PARLIAMENTARY FUNDING OF POST

Discussions since POST presented its paper (INF/4) lead us to suggest a possible mechanism for the Committee's consideration. The Figure shows the structure proposed.

#### *Details of Operation/responsibilities*

*Reason for reporting to Information Committee.* POST's work serves backbenchers, Select Committees and anticipates the needs of both. The Information Committee can be in the best position to judge POST's contribution in the wider context of Parliament's information needs.

*Board Membership.* The current Board membership is comprised (see Annex) of MPs, Peers and non-Parliamentary members. We need to bring this Board fully into the Parliamentary structure. We suggest that the MPs on the Board be appointed by the House of Commons Information Committee, and the Peer members by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee. The Board would appoint non-Parliamentary members after consultation with the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee (either that, or the Assessors who will be necessary to continue the successful synergism between MPs, Peers and the Scientific Community which has already been achieved).

*Board Responsibilities.* It is envisaged that the main decisions would continue to be taken by the Board, with the Information Committee reviewing (perhaps annually) performance, commenting on resource needs, and ensuring adequate co-ordination with the Library. The Board should appoint the Director of POST and would decide subjects, review drafts and be responsible for the quality of POST's services.

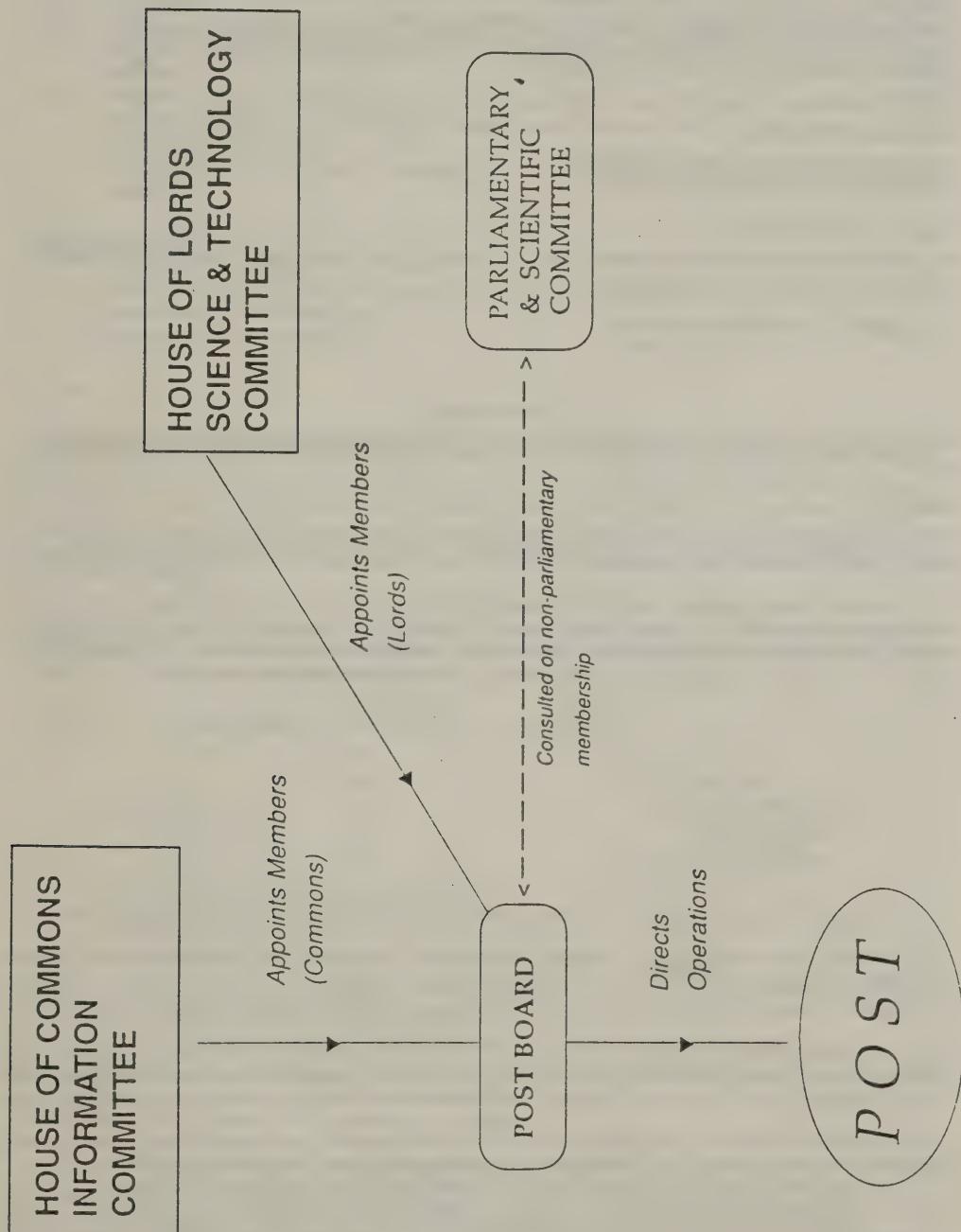
*Size of Initial Budget.* The POST paper (INF/4) suggests that "an appropriate level of service to start with would be between that currently provided and double that currently provided". This would place the budget at between £220,000 and £440,000 (1991 equivalents). POST's submission also points out that the current commitments of POST's charitable sponsors could allow a phased transfer to parliamentary funding, starting with part funding in the 1992-93 financial year and leading to full support in the 1993-94 financial year.

Table 3 in the POST submission showed the budgets of Parliamentary Technology Assessment Agencies in other countries. Their budgets, expressed on a *per capita* basis are:  
Denmark 19.2p; Netherlands 9.15p; USA 5.2p; Germany 1.75p; France 1.1p.

UK's is currently 0.4p *per capita*. A budget of £0.5 million, would represent a *per capita* provision of 0.9p. This shows that even the highest level of resources suggested by the Board would still make POST the cheapest of the national offices so far established.

On the twin grounds of demand established via the questionnaire and comparability with other organisations, we thus urge the Committee to consider a steady growth for POST from its current budget of £220,000 (staff of six) in 1992 to a budget of £0.5 million (staff of 12-15) by 1995.

*Administrative Reporting.* Comparable agencies abroad are independent offices of the legislature. However, the Ibbs Report argued for a reduction in the number of independent parliamentary departments. It is thus unrealistic to expect POST with its modest size to justify full independence. The question thus arises of where does the Director (as an officer of the House) reside in the organisational structure of Parliament. The preferred option appears to be the *Department of the Clerks*. The grade of the Director would be determined by the staff inspection procedures of Parliament.



## ANNEX 1

## PRESENT CONSTITUTION OF THE BOARD

*Officers*Chairman *Member of the House of Commons*Vice-Chairman (Parliamentary) *Member of the House of Lords*Vice-Chairman (Non-Parliamentary) *Member of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee*Treasurer *Member of the House of Commons*

Director

*Parliamentary Members*

Four Members of the House of Commons

Four Members of the House of Lords

*Non-Parliamentary Members*

Six distinguished scientists and engineers selected by the PSC to maintain a balance across the primary disciplines of Science and Technology.

(*Ex-officio*: The President of the PSC  
 The Chairman of the PSC)

## APPENDIX 2

## Memorandum submitted by the Director of Finance and Administration House of Commons (INF/26)

## POST

You asked me, on behalf of the Information Committee to examine the current financial position of POST and to prepare advice for the Committee about the alternate financing options which have been proposed.

The current financial position, as at 30 November 1991, is attached at Annex A. The current cash in hand is £162,500, which represents approximately one years' expenses. POST does not produce regular cash flow forecasts, but the revised estimates, which assume POST substantially out of funds by 31 March 1993, I consider to be fair. I set out below my own forecast, using Parliamentary financial years:

|                   | From 30.11.91<br>to 31.03.92 | To 31.03.93 |
|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------|
|                   | £K                           | £K          |
| Current cash      | 162                          | 112         |
| Funds promised    | 0                            | 42          |
| Interest received | 10                           | 6           |
| Expenditure       | 60                           | 168.5       |
| Cash end of year  | 112                          | (8.5)       |

It does appear from all the information received that the current funding will cease early in 1992.

The 1992-93 estimates have already been approved by the Commission. No provision has been included for POST. It appears that POST if the House does agree (following a favourable Report from the Committee) to make appropriate provision, would not require funds until the year beginning 1 April 1993.

It is also assumed that any scheme for funding POST would be agreed by the two Houses, and the costs shared with the House of Lords in the usual formula of 78:22. It is intended there should be consultation with the House of Lords Library and Computer Sub-Committee before the Committee approves the Report.

As regards the funding options suggested by POST, I will consider them simply from a financial and administrative point of view. The Committee is also considering wider implications, including:

- The added value to Parliament of POST's work, both in the past and as anticipated.
- The possible consequences of creating a precedent for similar requests for funding.
- Duplication of work carried out by the House of Commons Library, Research Councils, and specialist advisers to Committees.

The alternative funding options seem to be as follows:

1. *A separate agency funded by Parliament*—This could be analogous to the arrangements for the official shorthand writer, whereby a minimum level of work is guaranteed; this could be the core funding to enable POST to provide the current level of work (10-12 briefings and 3-4 assessments per annum). This would encourage POST to secure other funding especially fellowships, and to charge for advice to Committees on a commercial basis. Whether the nature of POST work is best carried out on a semi commercial basis is a matter for the Committee: the effort of fund raising will undoubtedly distract the Director.

The House of Commons involvement as a "sponsor department" would increase in direct proportion to the percentage of POST's costs which were from public funds. If these were over 50 per cent then the House would need to have some kind of monitoring and quasi audit role involving:

- (i) Assurance that adequate financial controls existed within the organisation.
- (ii) Assurances to the Commission that all moneys paid to POST were spent as they were intended to be spent.
- (iii) Probably the oversight of a memorandum trading account prepared on an accruals basis to be submitted to the Treasury for inclusion in the Fees and Charges Report prepared by the Chief Secretary.
- (iv) Depending on the Commission attitudes the possibility of the setting up of financial targets (not necessarily related to the earning of a return—possibly target level of external sponsorship or to break even overall); and
- (v) The organisation would need to prepare forecasts for the House of Commons PES and Estimates rounds.

This method might:

- (a) Minimise the charge on public funds.
- (b) Ensure that the service is closely related to the commercial environment, rather than becoming an academic study centre; and
- (c) Encourage a lean organisation.

## 2. Part internal, part external

This option would transfer the core staff of POST to the House of Commons and House of Lords budgets with additional fellowships funded on a need basis. If POST was funded in this manner, the present administrative work of the Director, including seretary and accounting work, would be minimised, by being provided from existing House services. Estimated administrative savings are very much guess work, but I estimate about £10,000 per year: in addition the Director has estimated 15-20 per cent of his time has been spent on administrative matters. In addition, accommodation costs of say £30,000 (1,000 sq ft at £30) would be met centrally.

This structure, which is basically that envisaged in the revised submission by POST, would, therefore, not be administratively inconvenient and would allow for parliamentary control on resources and outside influence on the work programme to be balanced.

The level of resources required for core staff on this basis might be as follows:

|  | £ (pa at 91/2<br>costs) |   |
|--|-------------------------|---|
| 1 Director (Grade 5)   | 50,000                  | NOTE: salary<br>cost includes<br>NI & Pension |
| 1 Secretary (Personal)   | 18,000                  |   |
| 3 Scientists/Engineers (health/environment/physics/<br>communications)                       | 75,000                  |   |
| 2 Fellowships (granted annually—depending on specific need)                                  | 50,000                  |   |
|  | 193,000                 |   |
| + + Outside fellowships, e.g., COPUS<br>Administration—travel, etc., stationery and printing | 27,000                  |   |
|  | 220,000                 |   |

Other central costs—space, administration not assessed.

There is an analogy within the House—Broadcasting, where for pay and rations the Director of Broadcasting reports to the Clerk of the House, but where policy issues are considered by the House in debate on reports from the Select Committee on Broadcasting. Provided the initial appointments of POST staff were on a term basis—say, three years—this would enable the structure and work to be monitored. The monitoring should be both quantitative and qualitative (peer reviews and Members) and formally reported at least annually to the Information Committee.

## 3. Parliamentary Organisation

The National Audit Office (NAO) analogy, suggested by POST, is not good in view of the NAO employing several hundred staff and being a major Department—POST, in my view, is too small to warrant legislation, and independence can be maintained by other means.

## CONCLUSION

It is, of course, for the Committee to recommend the type of funding scheme to the House.

From a cost and administrative point of view the external and internal options are not widely different. It is perhaps worth observing that if the unique contribution POST can make to the two Houses is to be able to anticipate rather than to react in providing advice on major issues, this might best be secured under an internal arrangement which did not subject POST to too many day to day commercial pressures.

I have consulted the Clerk of the House as Accounting Officer on the above paper.

4 February 1992

## ANNEX A

| <i>Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology cash at Bank</i> |                   |        |         |                      |
|--|-------------------|--------|---------|----------------------|
|  | £000              |        |         |                      |
|  | 1988 <sup>1</sup> | 1989   | 1990    | 1991 <sup>2</sup>    |
| <b>INCOME</b>  |                   |        |         |                      |
| <sup>1</sup> Donations   |                   |        |         | 16.0                 |
| Industry   | 69.7              | 41.4   | 39.4    | 27.2                 |
| MPs  | 1.5               | 1.2    | 1.8     | 1.4                  |
| Foundations  | —                 | 18.0   | 105.2   | 114.2                |
| Assoc and Units  | —                 | 7.7    | 15.4    | 14.4                 |
| <sup>2</sup> Subs  | —                 | 0.3    | 1.0     | 2.3                  |
| <sup>3</sup> Recoverable Tax                                       | 0.7               | 1.5    | 1.2     | 2.5                  |
| <sup>4</sup> Bank Interest   | 1.5               | 7.3    | 12.9    | 10.8                 |
|  | 73.4              | 77.4   | 176.9   | 188.8                |
| <b>EXPENDITURE</b>   |                   |        |         |                      |
| Special Project  |                   |        | 3.8     |                      |
| Symposium Exp  |                   |        | 0.6     |                      |
| Sponsors Reccep  |                   |        | 0.5     |                      |
| Salaries   | 4.5               | 26.9   | 69.8    |                      |
| Prof Fees and Adv  | 3.5               | 0.6    | 2.4     |                      |
| Office Rent  | 1.3               | 5.8    | 12.0    |                      |
| Office Running   |                   |        |         |                      |
| Costs  | 0.8               | 4.5    | 4.5     |                      |
| Travel Expenses  | 0.4               | 2.6    | 3.2     |                      |
| Depreciation   | 1.2               | 4.3    | 5.8     |                      |
| Pension  |                   |        |         |                      |
| Contributions  | —                 | 5.0    | 6.3     |                      |
| Recruitment  | —                 | 1.4    | —       |                      |
| Bank Charges   | —                 | 0.1    | 1.0     |                      |
| Irrecoverable VAT  | —                 | 0.4    | —       |                      |
| Admin Fees   | —                 | 6.5    | 1.7     |                      |
|  | (11.7)            | (58.1) | (111.6) | (159.0) <sup>3</sup> |
| Item not involving movement of funds                               | (2.0)             | 4.3    | 5.8     |                      |
| Increase in WC   | 0.9               | (2.3)  | (5.4)   |                      |
| Capital Equipment  | —                 | (9.3)  | (5.4)   |                      |
| Increase/(decrease) in cash at bank                                | 60.6              | 12.0   | 60.1    | 29.8                 |
| Cash b/f   | NIL               | 60.6   | 72.6    | 132.7                |
| Balance c/f  | 60.6              | 72.6   | 132.7   | 162.5                |

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> 6 months only.

<sup>2</sup> 11 months to November.

<sup>3</sup> Payments on cash basis.

## APPENDIX 3

## Supplementary Memorandum submitted by the Librarian (INF/15)

## A COMPARISON BETWEEN LIBRARY AND POST PAPERS

*The Library*

Since May 1989 the Science and Environment Section of the Library has produced 28 papers, most of which dealt with scientific, technological or environmental issues. Of these, around 18 had a significant scientific content. The scientific papers include four dealing with legislation (Food Safety Bill;

Environmental Protection Bill; Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill; Cardiff Bay Barrage Bill). The average length of the scientific papers is around 30 pages. The normal print run is 300 copies, of which 270 are available within the Palace of Westminster (to MPs, Peers and Research Assistants). They are not automatically sent to particular Members but are picked up from the Library by Members if they seem useful. Some, such as the paper on the Environmental Protection Bill, are reprinted several times.

These scientific papers, which are written by highly qualified scientists, are based upon published sources and limited telephone consultation with outside experts or civil servants. This method of working enables them to be produced very quickly when necessary so as to reflect a particular Parliamentary requirement such as a debate. They are impartial in the sense that they present both sides of an issue and do not offer any policy prescriptions or options.

#### POST

Over the same time period POST has produced around 30 Briefing Notes, normally of four pages each. They cover scientific topics impartially and avoid policy prescriptions. They use written sources but also use far more consultation with outside experts than is feasible for the Library. In areas where there is a considerable amount of published material—as is normally the case—that difference of approach is less important than might be expected. Although POST Briefing Notes cover mainly scientific topics, they have also entered more general science policy areas such as the British Technology Group, Antarctica, Science Education.

In addition, POST has produced a few longer studies including recent studies of high-performance computing and the “relationship between defence and civil science and technology”. These studies are not necessarily longer than Library Papers—although the high-performance computing study at 70 pages is definitely longer—but the method of writing is very different. These studies benefit from views expressed in specially-organised seminars of outside experts. The actual report also tends to be written by one or more outside experts rather than by in-house staff.

#### IS THERE AN OVERLAP?

Library papers are longer than the POST briefing notes and bring together a broader range of aspects including history and legislation as well as science and technology. In some cases POST briefing notes are similar to individual sections of Library papers. In other cases, they present a more condensed account of a particular subject area. The range of subjects covered is very similar and we believe that there is a considerable potential overlap, particularly if POST's output of briefing notes were to increase. The volume of Library papers is constrained by the availability of staff and the demands of our inquiry work for individual Members which, however, has given our researchers a considerable experience of the needs of Members of Parliament. An extra Assistant Library Clerk would lead to a significant increase in the number of scientific papers prepared for Members generally. We believe that this would be an economically efficient way of helping to strengthen support for Parliament in this broad subject area.

Our experience suggests that there is a need for technology assessment for Parliament. In its longer studies POST is able to make greater use of outside expertise and consultation than is the case for Library papers. We therefore do not consider that these substantial POST reports represent an overlap with Library services. They are, rather, an additional original source available to Members. However, we are concerned about duplication between the Library's scientific papers and POST briefing notes.

15 January 1992

#### APPENDIX 4

##### Memorandum submitted by The Leverhulme Trust (INF/10)

I am replying to your letter of 19 December about the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. I have read the Submission to the Information Committee which you enclosed with your letter and will do my best to answer your questions.

You will of course know that The Leverhulme Trust has contributed £96,250 towards the activities of POST and before doing so we did of course make quite extensive consultations.

Our advice was that although the House of Commons library performs a very valuable function in providing answers to scientific and technical problems for Members of Parliament, there was a very good case for providing an additional unit which would be able to perform functions not provided by the library. Our advisers told us that there would be very great advantages for Members of Parliament to be provided on a regular basis with well-written accounts of scientific and technical issues which were based not only on a detailed analysis of the literature, but which were a consensus of informed opinion among leaders in the fields concerned.

I must tell you that the Trustees were very surprised that a charitable trust should be asked to provide such a service, even on an experimental basis; they took the view that this is surely something that Parliament itself could provide. However, they agreed in the end to make a grant for a strictly limited period of three years, and I am quite sure that they will not entertain a request for its extension.

Dr Norton has been kind enough to send me copies of the briefing papers as they appeared for our files, and also some of the more detailed assessments. I have read them all with care and have drawn the attention of the Trustees to them. They have been impressed by the quality of the papers and so far as I am able to judge, I think that the work done so far has been of a very high standard. I cannot of course judge how far Members of Parliament themselves have found them useful.

I think the practice adopted by POST of consulting very widely among the scientific and engineering community before preparing their papers, and then subjecting their drafts to peer review in various ways, is an extremely good one. It is obviously a technically demanding and time-consuming process which the library information system would find difficult to do. It is nevertheless of very great value and I very much hope that Parliament will decide to continue the office of POST in some form or another, and that it will be possible to make their findings even more widely available than they are now.

I have read the recommendations from the POST Board and they seem to me very sensible but I am not really competent to comment further.

I can quite see that you do not want to set up another office to duplicate or indeed compete with the excellent service provided by the library, but as I have said above it seems to me that POST has been performing an additional and extremely valuable function.

I very much hope it will prove to be possible to continue and extend it as proposed by the Board.

6 January 1992

#### APPENDIX 5

#### Memorandum submitted by The Fellowship of Engineering (INF/11)

##### PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Thank you for your letter of 19 December 1991 with its enclosures and for the opportunity to comment on the proposal that parliamentary funds be committed to support the future of POST.

The Fellowship has provided POST, since its inception, with subsidised office accommodation for its Director and his secretary within our Secretariat at Little Smith Street. This support has been provided because The Fellowship, as the national academy of engineering, considered that there was a very urgent need for such a service to parliament, that it should be publicly funded, but that if, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of an organisation such as POST, a trial period was required funded from other sources, then it was in the national interest for us to assist that process. We have provided this support for nearly three years and believe the excellent output from POST has well justified our confidence and that of all the other organisations which have similarly provided assistance.

However we do not consider it appropriate for such other charitable organisations and ourselves to have to continue indefinitely this support to a function which, towards the end of the 20th Century, is essential to the proper functioning of Parliament.

Britain is an industrial nation, but is in danger of ceasing to be so. Despite our history we have a culture which is reasonably supportive of science but is largely non-technological, non-industrial and non-numerate. Although many individuals are at pains to be experts in chosen fields and become most knowledgeable, an analysis of the background, qualifications and interests of MPs as a whole reflects the national culture. If Parliament is to properly consider the industrial, technological and scientific issues of the day it is essential that the balance is redressed by access for all members of both Houses to good, factual and unbiased briefing material and this is what POST provides. If this country wishes to maintain its claim to a place in the G7 nations it must improve its national economic performance; more and better briefing, as provided by POST is an essential contribution to informed parliamentary debate in this area.

I am not able to comment on the library services as set out in the Librarian's Memorandum. However, I note that POST claims that The House of Commons Library briefings lay more emphasis on the legislative history of the case, statements in debates and other published views. I am sure this is extremely valuable, but is complementary to POST's objective description of the key scientific and technological aspects of the issues. I also note that The House of Lords has no scientific library service.

The librarian's briefing note (INF/5 para 2) indicates that the library team's expertise does not extend into technology and engineering, concentrating on pure sciences and medicine. This is another reflection of the national culture. We really must address technology and its industrial applications. I think that even POST, whilst doing this to good effect could broaden its activities to advantage yet further in this respect and official status and funding would enable it to do so.

Whilst the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee has done an excellent job in establishing PSTIF and POST I believe that the aim should be as set out in Option 3 of the submission. With POST structured as

an official body and its Director an Officer of The House it would be free to service all parliamentary bodies including Select Committees and other groups similar in concept to the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee such as the Parliamentary Maritime Committee, the Parliamentary Group for Engineering Development and others with an industrial context. Not only would this widen the effectiveness of POST's excellent output but it would also tend to improve the technological and industrial coverage referred to above.

To answer your three questions more specifically:

- (i) In its present form POST can draw quite well on the intellectual reserves of the scientific community but could do much better as an official body. It also needs to broaden its base further into the technological and industrial field. As an official body it could do this and also serve a broader clientele within parliament. This development would be in areas not covered by the library service.
- (ii) I very strongly support the POST case, set out in the submission, for an approximate doubling of resources. This is necessary to meet the wider market I have described above. Even then it will be running on the absolute minimum necessary to address the task as is demonstrated by comparison with arrangements in other countries.
- (iii) I support Option 3. If the need for legislation implies delay beyond the election I would reluctantly support Option 1 as a transitional measure as suggested by the POST Board. However, this must not lead to protracted delay as the charitable funding provided so far to demonstrate initial feasibility may not be continued indefinitely.

POST, with its limited resources has well, but partially, met a very great and long-standing need. It should be converted into an official body as soon as possible and expanded to about twice its present size, with a wider clientele, as soon as possible.

9 January 1992

## APPENDIX 6

### Memorandum submitted by The Wellcome Trust (INF/12)

#### PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (POST)

I am glad to respond to your request to comment on the activities of, and need for, POST.

#### BACKGROUND

The Wellcome Trust was created under the Will of Sir Henry Wellcome who died in 1936. It derives its income from its holding of about 75 per cent of the ordinary shares of Wellcome plc, together with investments in more than 300 organisations throughout the world. The objectives of the Trust are to support research in the biomedical sciences and the History of Medicine, and for the current financial year 1991-92 it has budgeted a sum in excess of £100 million in pursuit of these objectives.

One area to which the Trustees attach high priority is the public understanding of medical research and the necessary preconditions for a continuation of the UK's historical leading role in medical research. The Trust's main initiative in this area is to establish the Centre for Medical Science and History.

The Trust has also noted the sustained interest of Parliament in health and medical research and had been seeking for some time to find an effective way of helping inform Parliament on such issues. When we became aware of POST and the possibilities it offered for Westminster Fellowships, the Trustees agreed to support a fellowship for three years (April 1990-93).

#### TERMS OF THE FELLOWSHIP

The Trust provides financial support for a Fellow who is recruited by POST and responsible solely to the Director of POST. Decisions on what work should be carried out are for the POST Board alone.

#### RESPONSE TO THE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS OF THE COMMITTEE

##### (i) *How far can POST tap into the intellectual reserves of the science and technology community?*

We conclude that POST has been most effective in its ability to harness the knowledge of the science and technology community whether it be in companies, research institutes, hospitals or Universities. In this, POST has been able to use the network already established by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, and to harvest the goodwill present and ensure contact with leading experts. The results of POST's work have, on scientific grounds, been thorough, up-to-date, readable and balanced papers.

When the output of POST is compared with that of similar organisations, it is clear that POST's *modus operandi* is very cost-effective.

(ii) *Future Resources*

This must be a decision for Parliament to make in the light of competing demands for other services. However, we would comment that POST's own assessment of the future resource needs appear to be on the modest side, since it appears unreasonable to expect that the ESRC (and other organisations such as the Open University) should continue to support POST's longer studies (technology assessments) *ad infinitum*. POST would thus need the equivalent of an extra two staff just to maintain its current operations. Perhaps a good guide to the level of resources might be that provided by other EC countries with similar offices, each of which have budgets of £0.5-1 million pa. equivalent to 10-15 staff.

(iii) *Views on Administration and Financial Mechanisms*

This is not a matter on which the Trust feels it appropriate to comment except that we believe POST's strength is in its outward-looking structure and *modus operandi*. This, and its strong links with the science and technology community, should be preserved in any future arrangement.

**GENERAL COMMENT**

The Trust has been glad to provide funding for the three-year period fellowship and will honour its full commitment in the event of parliamentary funding being given to POST. The Trustees have already discussed the possibility of extending its support beyond three years in the event of Parliamentary funding not being provided, but have concluded that it would be an inappropriate use of their funds to support POST beyond the initial period required to demonstrate the usefulness of POST's service. The Trust believes that POST has shown itself to be a serious, balanced and reliable source of information concerning science and technology issues, and commends its activities to the Information Committee.

9 January 1992

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**APPENDIX 7**

**Memorandum submitted by the Science and Engineering Research Council (INF/13)**

**PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the future support and work of POST. You ask particularly for views on POST's capability to draw on the intellectual reserves of the community in formulating its advice; the level of resource required; and possible administrative and financial mechanisms:

POST has fulfilled a valuable role (which had previously been ill-focussed) in providing neutral cross-boundary advice to Parliament and to Select Committees. The quality of debates and examination of scientific affairs by the House can only improve, given cogent and unbiased advice, as provided by POST.

The Briefing Notes have been particularly well prepared. I am unclear precisely how Mike Norton has drawn on expertise in the scientific community. Certainly he has, from time to time, consulted both the SERC and me personally on issues to be discussed in the Briefing Notes. The fact that the Notes are widely seen as balanced and objective suggests that the consultation process is adequate—though doubtless resource limited. My colleagues and I have found the Notes a useful summary and I can only conclude that the same is likely to be true for Members of Parliament.

I feel that POST has shown itself to be a cost effective and productive organisation which has maximised the available resources through the use of secondments and fellowships. Having proved the concept, I would urge that parliamentary funding be now made available to establish and expand the work of POST. The current level of support is modest. The success of the organisation has been critically dependent on the fellowships, supported by the charities, to top up the core staffing of Director and secretary. Funding for administrative support is essential and longer term funding of at least some of the researchers is highly desirable.

Mention is made in the report of possible secondments from the Research Councils—I would welcome such a move in terms of increased interaction between POST and SERC.

Option 3, a parliamentary organisation, would appear to be the preferred strategy for the future. The model includes the important proviso that the organisation would be free to initiate its own studies. I would support the suggestion of a phased replacement of private funding by Parliamentary funding, with detailed preparations for option 3 being put in hand.

Other comments I would wish to make are:

- POST fulfills a valuable and necessary role. Its effectiveness has been demonstrated and with sustained resources it will/can only continue to improve the awareness of science and technology issues by the House.

- I am not in a position to comment as a user of the Library services. However from the evidence submitted it appears that there is possible overlap in the preparation of briefing notes.
- Both the Briefing Notes and Technology Assessments are crucial parts of the POST service. The role in technology assessment should increase.
- The interaction with Select Committees is important. However POST should retain its objective and neutral examination of science and technology issues. It should not become involved in any investigation of departmental practice.

In conclusion I hope that POST will continue, but ultimately under parliamentary funding. I would welcome the opportunity for greater interaction between POST and the Research Councils.

10 January 1992

#### APPENDIX 8

##### Memorandum submitted by the Natural Environment Research Council (INF/14)

###### PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Thank you for inviting my comments on future arrangements for the work of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). I particularly welcome having this opportunity, since I believe that the Office has made considerable strides in making often complex scientific and technological issues more accessible to its largely non-specialist audience, and in highlighting the importance of scientific and technological considerations to many of the topics that come up before Parliament. I would give my strong support to the continuation of POST.

You specifically invited comment on POST's interaction with the scientific community. I would say that NERC's experience has been invariably good. Dr Norton's own scientific background and strengths in communication have ensured that the Office has developed and made good use of a wide network of contacts in the scientific and engineering sphere.

When POST was established in 1989, NERC (with the other Research Councils) offered to provide information and expertise on subjects which POST might be called on to review. Since then we have been involved in either providing information for, or undertaking expert review of, the following POST briefings:

- Drinking Water Quality.
- Release of Genetically Modified Organisms.
- Fate of Bacteria and Viruses in Sea Water.
- Global Warming.
- Antarctica.
- Oil Fires in Kuwait.

In addition, NERC took part in POST's study on High Performance Computing in the UK, which has recently been completed. NERC's Director of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences (Dr John Woods) was also invited to speak at a discussion meeting arranged in connection with this study.

Most of the POST/NERC interaction has been with scientists at NERC Institutes, for example, the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (ITE), British Geological Survey (BGS) and Plymouth Marine Laboratory (PML). Staff at NERC Swindon have provided support on issues such as global warming and high performance computing and also maintain a close on-going link with the Director of POST. A member of NERC staff (from BAS) was seconded to POST for six months.

I have to say that we do not appear to have similarly close links with the Science and Environment Section of the House of Commons Library. Certainly we have not had approaches to NERC at Swindon for information on any of the scientific questions that have been covered recently by the Library.

There seems to be a concern over the potential for overlap between POST and the Library in the preparation of Briefing Notes. I am not in a position to comment in detail on this, but from what I have seen of recent Library Briefings, the analysis in the POST paper seems apt. The Library has appeared to focus on more academic background and review-type papers based largely on published material. POST, on the other hand, with its excellent network of contacts and its own research expertise, seems to be far better placed to deal with, and provide up-to-the-minute opinion and analysis of, complex or controversial issues.

You invite comment on the level of staff resources for POST in the future and also on the alternative administrative and financial mechanism discussed in the POST Memorandum. The Briefing Notes provided by POST have been a very valuable addition to the awareness literature. They are of high quality, and have achieved remarkable condensation of complex information in a balanced and readable format. I am sure that the need for such Briefings will, if anything, increase. Any significant development of POST's work in support of the Select Committees, and in particular in providing detailed Technology Assessments, would therefore clearly need additional professional staff. There seems to be a demand already for such

developments from at least some of the Select Committees, and POST would be well placed to play a valuable role in assisting the Committees through the provision of an additional source of unbiased basic information. I am not, however, able to judge whether the demand is such as to justify an immediate doubling of the present complement or whether a more stepwise increase would be more appropriate.

It is not really my place to comment on the administrative arrangements, but on the face of it Option 2 looks the least satisfactory. Whichever Option is adopted, it will be vital to ensure (as stated in para 4.3.2.3) that the current emphasis on using the science and technology community outside Parliament will continue. I believe it would also be beneficial if the POST Board were able, through its non-parliamentary membership, to have access to advice from practising scientists and engineers as well as those who are now out of the mainstream of research.

In summary, NERC experience of POST over the last three years has been that it has provided a consistent source of objective and informative analysis. It has been very effective in tapping the expertise of the science and technology community in providing valuable assessments and briefings in a readily understandable form and must, even in its short existence, have made a significant contribution to raising understanding of the relevance of science and technology to many legislative and political decisions. I strongly support the continuation of POST's activities and the future plans set out in its document to the Committee.

15 January 1992

#### APPENDIX 9

##### Memorandum submitted by The Nuffield Foundation (INF/16)

###### PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Thank you for your letter of 19 December.

You will know that the Foundation makes a grant to POST towards its core costs. The grant began when POST was founded in 1989 and is scheduled to end this year. In making this grant my Trustees were convinced that POST had the potential to play an important and distinctive role in informing members of both Houses of Parliament on scientific and technological issues. It was an unusual grant for them to make, since it is not the normal business of charities to provide financial support for the workings of Parliament. They nevertheless took the view that what was being proposed was very different in kind from the existing services available to Parliament and that it was therefore appropriate for the Foundation to provide a measure of support in the short term to enable POST to establish itself and to demonstrate that there was a demand for its services.

This it has clearly done. My Trustees have been impressed by the consistently high standards of scientific accuracy and impartiality evidenced by the POST reports. The choice of subjects has been informed and judicious. The evidence presented in the POST memorandum demonstrates that it provides a service which is welcomed by members of both Houses, and which is different in kind from existing services.

You ask for comments on three points in particular:

- (1) As the memorandum makes clear, one of the most important and distinctive features of POST is that it is able to draw on a wide range of scientific and technological expertise at the highest levels. Its reports are thus authoritative and up to date. By consulting experts who hold a variety of different viewpoints POST is able to present a balanced and impartial view of contentious issues.
- (2) The proposals in the POST memorandum seem on the face of it appropriate and clearly justified. The process of peer review and consultation with experts requires a higher level of support than does the writing of reports based simply on existing library materials.
- (3) Again the recommendations of the POST board seem appropriate. As far as this Foundation is concerned my Trustees took the view that they were prepared to provide support on a short-term basis to enable POST to prove itself. I am sure that their view would be that it has now done so.

I hope these comments are helpful.

21 January 1992

#### APPENDIX 10

##### Memorandum submitted by the Economic and Social Research Council (INF/17)

###### PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Thank you for your letter of 19 December. You ask a number of detailed questions about the proposals for the future funding of POST, but I want to begin with the general statement that my Council would welcome proposals to put the future funding of POST on a more secure footing. We have been happy to

collaborate with Dr Norton and his colleagues in the past and are pleased to see the clear statement on Page 14 of the Proposal that the "outreach" function would be maintained by continuing to involve the wider science and technology community in the work of POST.

This leads on to your specific questions. We have had a number of approaches from POST to provide them with advice and resources and to put them in touch with relevant people in the social science academic community. Our experience has been that they have made careful and sensitive use of those intellectual resources, as, for example, in the case of the paper on Defence and Civil Science and Technology, which is discussed on Page 6 of their document.<sup>1</sup> However, it seems likely that the pressure of business to which social science can contribute will increase steadily. In these circumstances, there is clearly a case for POST to have at least a small increase in its staffing to allow it to include someone with relevant socio-economic expertise on its staff. No doubt there are equally good arguments to be made in other areas. (This will be even more the case if POST seeks to increase the amount of work it is undertaking in the broad area of technology assessment.)

My Council will, of course, continue to respond positively to requests from POST, under any of the proposed modes of support. We would see the increase in staffing there as encouraging, rather than replacing this collaborative activity. I do not think it is for us to offer any specific advice on the proposed administrative and financial mechanisms, except perhaps to make the rather general comment that there are contrasting benefits to be had from a degree of independence on the one hand and from close association with the prestige of Parliament on the other. We would simply hope that the momentum which POST has built up can be continued under whatever arrangements are decided.

If we can provide any further information or be of other assistance, please let me know.

20 January 1992

#### APPENDIX 11

#### Memorandum submitted by The Royal Society (INF/22)

##### PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (POST)

I write on behalf of the Council of the Royal Society in reply to your letter of 19 December 1991 inviting the Society's comments on two memoranda concerning "the nature of the service which might be provided by POST, the co-ordination of such a service with those already provided by the Library, and the financial needs of POST" and, more particularly, on the links between POST and the scientific community, the staffing needs of POST and future administrative and financial mechanisms.

##### *Background*

2. The Royal Society has fully supported the concept of POST since the early 1980s when discussions on the subject were initiated within the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. Science and technology are an integral and essential part of modern industrial societies. Industrial and public policy, and many private decisions, involve science and technology and require informed debate. Legislatures in other advanced countries, e.g., USA, Germany and France, have established offices of science and technology and we have long considered a comparable response by the UK to be appropriate.

3. In the absence of official support in 1986, the Society supported Members' decision to establish the Parliamentary Science and Technology Information Foundation both by providing financial support and inviting the new organisation to use the Society's good offices to gain access to appropriate expertise and information. Through COPUS (the Committee on Public Understanding of Science jointly established by the Society, the British Association and the Royal Institution) the Society has supported Westminster Fellowships which enable scientists and engineers to be seconded to POST for three-month periods. And the Society has collaborated with POST in mounting symposia as a part of its substantive projects.

##### *The work of POST*

4. POST has produced consistently good and widely respected work in its 2-3 years. Its analyses have been accurate, thorough and scrupulously objective over a wide range of subjects and issues. As the POST submission (para 4.2) rightly states "[the] notes provide an objective description of the key scientific and technological aspects of an issue [and] the area where there is agreement and disagreement in the science and technology underlying the issue". POST has succeeded in mobilising scientists and engineers outside Parliament to contribute to or participate in the process of assembling and reviewing its analyses, thereby further ensuring their quality and objectivity.

5. Against the background of both our own contacts with Parliamentarians and the results of the questionnaires we fully endorse the view that POST's work has significantly added to the services to

<sup>1</sup>Not reprinted here.

Members and endorse the arguments that it should continue, and that it should be enabled to provide a flexible and varied service to meet the needs of Parliament. The results of the initial phase of POST's operations, under charitable support, have demonstrated its value. It would seem appropriate for it to be continued now with Parliamentary funding.

#### *Future work and resources*

6. We believe the three main functions of POST should continue—briefing notes, briefings for Select Committees and technology assessments. We endorse POST's view that direct overlap with Library services can readily be avoided; different approaches to specific issues are to be welcomed. Moreover, the role of POST will as often be to pose and to answer the as yet unasked question in a policy field strongly influenced by science and technology. In this it will not overlap with the response to Members' questions and interests which the Library provides and for which we would endorse the plea for additional resources.

7. Synergistic work with Select Committees to provide background to their enquiries is an area which could and should be much expanded given additional resources, and there is a substantial need for more full-scale technology assessment exercises. We believe, however, in a measured approach to expansion, and would share the view of POST that initially parliamentary funds to meet staff resources and overheads of between the present level and double that currently provided would be right. We would strongly favour continuing the arrangement of secondments from the science and engineering communities.

#### *Administrative and Financial Mechanisms*

8. POST should retain a structure and *modus operandi* which continues to mobilise effectively the science and technology resources outside Parliament. It needs to be, and be seen to be, an entity able to pursue short and long term issues and, as we have remarked, alerting Parliament to new and emerging scientific issues as well as responding to ones already apparent. The present form of the POST Board, with representatives of the science and technology community, enhances that capacity and should be continued. Either Option 1 or 3 of the POST submission would be consistent with these principles.

#### *Conclusion*

9. We commend to the Information Committee the continuation of POST, under Parliamentary funding. It is for Parliament to decide whether it wishes to continue to receive such input on science and technology related issues and to determine the best way of receiving such services. But we believe POST has demonstrated its value to Members of Parliament and made a strong case for continuation and expansion. Its decline or demise now would not only be keenly felt in the House but be a severe blow to the science and engineering communities for whom it now represents a very visible measure of the growing interest in and concern of Members with matters scientific and technological.

## APPENDIX 12

### **Memorandum submitted by the Agricultural and Food Research Council (INF/25)**

1. The Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC) provides the UK with an internationally competitive research and training base in all sciences underpinning agriculture and food; including non-medical biological sciences, biotechnology and engineering. The Council's research and training is carried out in its own institutes and through research grants, studentships and fellowships in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

#### **PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

2. The establishment of POST was a welcome initiative and AFRC supports its permanent establishment to continue and further develop the role it has fulfilled since 1989. For the future particular emphasis might be placed on the science and technology assessment role drawing on expert opinion to assess options in key areas of science and technology.

3. Comments on the specific questions:

(i) *To what extent do you regard POST in its present form as able satisfactorily to draw on the intellectual reserves of the scientific community in order to channel scientific and technological advice to parliamentarians?*

In its report the POST Board makes clear that POST draws extensively on the scientific community to assist in its work of preparing Briefing Notes on topical issues relevant to the Parliamentary Agenda, briefings to Select Committees, and Technology Assessments. Briefing Notes on topics within AFRC's areas of responsibility and interests include BSE and Slow Viruses, Science Funding and Scientific Manpower, Transport of Farm Animals, Food Irradiation, IVF and Embryo Research, Release of GMOs, Understanding the Human Genome, Global Warming, British Technology Group, World Population, Patenting Life and Microbes in Food. On the evidence of these papers, which are of a high standard, scientifically correct and impartial, POST already has well developed mechanisms for drawing on the advice

of the scientific community. Any constraints are likely to be related to the scope within budgets to commission work or the breadth of scientific expertise available from the Westminster Fellows and the Board itself. Scientists seconded from Research Councils to POST and members or assessors from Research Councils on the proposed advisory committee are two possible ways of deepening contacts with the scientific community.

(ii) *Do you have any views on the level of staff resources which might be needed to equip POST to provide a more comprehensive service to both Houses of parliament in future?*

From the Report it is clear that there is a demand for POST's services which is likely to grow, and AFRC would welcome the permanent establishment of the Service at the level which aimed to meet Parliamentary demand for an increase in the number of in-depth Technology Assessments and the other functions of briefing and advice related to the specific needs of Select Committees, and to undertake anticipatory work on its own initiative.

Staff resources will need to be adequate in depth and breadth of expertise to cover in-house advice and commissioning or joint working with the scientific community. It will be important for staff and financial resources to be set at a level which also preserves scope for an increase in the output of Technology Assessments and for anticipatory work, particularly at times of heavy demand from Select Committees. This might be achieved by meeting the costs of work undertaken for Select Committees from any resources available to the Committees for securing expert advice, so reducing the extent of demand-led calls on POST's resources and preserving the flexibility to operate, as appropriate, by external commissions with the scientific community, or secondments for limited periods from HEIs and Research Councils. AFRC, for example is about to second a biochemist to work on environmental issues.

(iii) *Do you have any views on the alternative administrative and financial mechanisms discussed in section 4.3 of the POST Memorandum?*

AFRC would support the permanent establishment of POST as a Parliamentary body and welcome interaction with it. Whatever organisational option is adopted it is important that the scope for independent and impartial advice and analysis, and the close and extensive involvement of the scientific community is preserved. The arrangements should also allow full use to be made of the resources of staff and information available within POST itself and the Library, particularly for the briefing function, including the regular briefing notes. Option 3, with six independently selected scientists and engineers on the Board would meet these criteria.

24 January 1992

#### APPENDIX 13

**Memorandum submitted by the Education, Science and Arts Committee  
Science and Technology Sub-Committee (INF/28)**

**PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

At its meeting yesterday the Science and Technology Sub-Committee considered your letter of 28 January about the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.

The Sub-Committee is wholeheartedly in favour of the proposition that POST should be financed by the two Houses, but is content to leave the detailed arrangements to be decided by the Information Committee.

6 February 1992

#### APPENDIX 14

**Memorandum submitted by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology  
Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (INF/29)**

**INTRODUCTION**

1. The Science and Technology Committee supports POST's application for public funding. In our evidence we assess POST's work, why it should be supported, and how it might be adapted for the future; we make a number of observations on the level of funding and financial arrangements; and we consider what administrative arrangements would be appropriate.

**THE WORK OF POST**

2. Our experience of POST's work is based on their publications—Briefing Notes and Technology Assessments—and on private briefing for our Committee.

3. Briefing Notes are well informed and attractively and intelligently laid out. Our members have enjoyed reading them and it is to be hoped that they help to raise all members' understanding of current

science issues. A Briefing Note on broad band technology was produced at our behest. We note that the Commons Library consider that, with modest increase in staff, they could do this work just as effectively. It is, however, not just a matter of extra staff. Library information services rely almost entirely upon the published word, whereas POST relies heavily upon the opinions of scientists and technologists working in the field with whom it is therefore their business to be in touch. We hope that the Information Committee's recommendations will ensure that the present character of Briefing Notes and their wide range of subject matter can be maintained.

4. Technology Assessments have been rather less successful in our view partly because POST has not been financed generously enough to do them properly. They are neither fish nor fowl. As documents in themselves they lack the authority of Select Committee reports; and as feasibility studies or background papers "to prepare the ground and facilitate an inquiry" by a Select Committee they are probably over elaborate.

5. POST was able to provide our Clerk with some of the material which helped us come to a decision on suitable subjects for investigation this year. It proved to be a useful source of "in-house" specialist advice for an exercise in which conventional specialist advisers do not normally take part.

6. Following public funding we hope that POST will devote more attention in the first instance to satisfying the requests for assistance from Select Committees. In our view much more could and should be made of the "responsive mode" work described in para 5. Furthermore, most Technology Assessments should be seen as preparatory to further work by Select Committees. In those cases where the technical nature of the subject matter renders it less amenable to Select Committee treatment then a fuller treatment might be contemplated. Requests from individual members of both Houses should continue to be met as far as possible, however. The Management Board will be able to adjudicate on the question of priorities and the prior claims of Select Committees.

#### THE LEVEL OF FUNDING ETC.

7. The appropriate level of funding will depend on whether POST or the Commons Library undertakes the writing of Briefing Notes. If we assume for present purposes that POST continues to undertake all its present functions and that the Management Board continues its existing policy whereby POST studies an issue only where it is of a sufficiently broad interest, public funding ought to be at least equal to the level of private sponsorship. (We understand that it is unlikely that the present level will continue in any case.) It might, however, be thought inappropriate for its budget to exceed that of—say—the average cost of a Commons Select Committee.

8. We consider that funding should be divided between the two Houses in the usual way and that the Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the House of Commons be Accounting Officers.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE MECHANISMS

9. POST's own evidence sets out three options. Contracting to a separate agency (option 1) would be inappropriate. The present connection between POST and the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee is a result of the latter's role in the genesis of POST and its funding until now. It was an inspired but temporary arrangement. Parliamentary funding requires POST to be more immediately accountable to the two Houses and responsive to their needs. This can best be guaranteed by a governing body which is thoroughly representative of the two Houses, while preserving the cross-party character of the present POST Board.

10. Establishing an office to contract work from outside bodies (option 2) would seem over-elaborate and the contractors would be too remote from individual members and parliamentary control. Furthermore, such a structure would render the Office less useful to Select Committees, which can in any case commission outside work to be done so long as it relates to their current enquires. They might prefer POST to be an "in-house" source of advice.

11. A non-statutory version of option 3 is our preferred solution therefore. We should like POST to be established as a separate office under parliamentary control, under the ultimate authority of the House of Commons Commission and the House of Lords Offices Committee. To seek legislation would in our view be time consuming and unnecessary. .

12. The office would comprise a Director and up to five scientific or engineering staff. In order to ensure that the staff remain close to their subjects no one apart from the Director should be employed for more than three years and up to two should, ideally, be one year fellows. The Director shall appoint such support staff as he may think fit. He should continue to contract such outside specialist assistance as is necessary.

13. The Office should be overseen by a Management board of eight voting members (four members from each House); four non-voting scientific assessors; and the House of Commons Librarian or his nominee and the Director of POST *ex officio*, both non-voting. The presence of the assessors on a regular basis would, we think, be infinitely preferable to the creation of a separate technical advisory committee.

14. We think that the voting members might be selected in one of two ways: *EITHER* the voting members of the Board shall be members of either House and should be nominated by the Committee of Selection in each House and should include the Chairmen of Select Committees whose remit includes a strong science and technology element, e.g., the Science and Technology Committee in the Lords and the Education, Science and Arts and Energy Committees in the Commons. Selection should be cross-party. The advantage of this method of selection is that it ensures that POST will be controlled, at least nominally, by the two Houses *as a whole*. It enables the usual channels to be represented if they wish as is usual in domestic Committees of both Houses while ensuring that Select Committees and hence back-bench members also play their part.

15. *OR* the voting members of the Board shall be members of either House and should be nominated by the Science and Technology Committee in the Lords and the Information Committee in the Commons. (Had POST been set up by the Science and Technology Committee as an advisory body it would have seemed natural for its affairs to have been regulated by a group nominated by the Committee; and *mutatis mutandis* the same arrangements might have applied in the House of Commons.) The advantage of this method of selection is that it ensures that POST will be controlled more firmly by its prospective users in the two Houses.

16. We have a marginal preference for selection of the voting members by the Committees of Selection as set out in paragraph 14 above.

17. The non-voting members should be selected by unanimous agreement by the voting members from a list of suitable candidates proposed by the Royal Society and Fellowship of Engineering and following consultation with the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. In selecting the assessors the voting members should have regard to the need for a spread of scientific expertise. Assessors should serve for up to three years.

18. The authority of the Board should be sought for all work undertaken by the Director and his staff.

#### ACCOMMODATION

19. We are in favour of accommodating POST on the Parliamentary estate.

### APPENDIX 15

#### Further Memorandum submitted by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (INF/32)

##### 1. INTRODUCTION

In response to an invitation by the Committee Clerk (letter of 11 February), the POST Board wishes to address the following points raised by Members.

##### 2. JUSTIFICATION FOR AN OFFICE FOR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The purpose of an office such as POST is to clarify policy issues which Members are asked to address and which arise from the role of science and technology in modern society. Dealing with such issues presents difficulties in disentangling fact from opinion, understanding the implication of complex technical information and concepts, and dealing with the uncertainty inherent in scientific issues. POST's parliamentarian founders saw a need for an organisation which would undertake impartial assessments of the scientific and technological background to important issues—as already provided in the USA and five EC Parliaments, and encouraged recently by the OECD.

In discussions extending over the last year within the Services Committee and the House of Commons Commission, and involving questionnaires to both Houses, the proposition that the UK Parliament should fund such an office has already been endorsed.

##### 3. COULD POST SURVIVE WITHOUT PARLIAMENTARY FUNDING?

POST was proposed by Parliamentarians from all parties and was only forced to seek private funding for a trial period when Mrs Thatcher declined to support immediate parliamentary funding. All POST's major sponsors have made it absolutely clear that they supported POST only on a demonstration basis. There is no doubt that were Parliamentary funding to be rejected in this enquiry, POST would not survive more than a year, and would be likely to enter a terminal contraction within a few months. In any case, the POST Board considers it inherently unsatisfactory to rely on private funding for more than the short term, in view of the possibility (in practice or in theory) that sponsors might influence the parliamentary agenda.

The only alternative to the parliamentary funding option currently favoured would be the purchase of services by Select Committees and other parliamentary bodies. This would deprive POST of the freedom to

anticipate parliamentary needs for scientific and technological advice. In proposing unified funding from the Lords and Commons, the Board of POST is seeking to maximise the advantages to Parliament of providing advice which is not subject either to commercial or wholly short-term political pressure.

#### 4. "ADDITIONALITY"

It was pointed out in evidence that POST has succeeded in supplementing its own resources with a major contribution from the science and technology community. This can be quantified roughly as follows:

*Briefing Notes.* The contributions of outside experts to a typical briefing note can range from a few person-days to as much as 1-2 person weeks: 20-40 per cent additional to POST's input.

*Technology Assessments.* Individual technology assessments harness considerable outside expertise throughout their preparation. In addition they may involve between 40 and 60 outside experts in meetings which submit the issue to intensive scrutiny and debate. Such contributions represent an additionality of up to 50 per cent on POST's investment.

*International Networks.* POST helped establish a network between EC technology assessment agencies, as well as with the USA. Many of the reports are on issues relevant to the UK parliamentary agenda, and facilitate studies by POST.

#### 5. POST'S CURRENT AND FUTURE SERVICES

The POST Board seeks to anticipate issues of broad interest to Parliament (both for individual Members and Select Committees). Where these are amenable to short analyses, the procedures now agreed with the Library will avoid overlap. **Most (>80 per cent) of POST's resources will go into longer technology assessments.**

**Those completed so far are:**

Technologies for Teaching  
Research and the NHS  
Relationships between Defence and Civil Science and Technology  
High Performance Computing

**Those in hand or under consideration include:**

Social Costs of Electricity Generation  
Conversion of Defence Technologies to Civil Use  
Use of Animals in Testing  
Setting Priorities in Government-funded Research  
The Polluter Pays Principle  
Safety of Nuclear Weapons in the former Soviet Union  
Low Intensity Agriculture

It must be emphasised that during the demonstration phase, POST has had to select subjects which could attract support (e.g., from ESRC) as well as being relevant to Parliament. With parliamentary funding, POST would be able to prioritise projects solely on the basis of their utility to Parliament.

#### 6. ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE POST BOARD

The selection of subjects by the POST Board has been contrasted with the responsiveness of the Library to the wishes of individual members. POST practice follows that in all other countries with technology assessment agencies, to ensure that the limited resources devoted to technology assessment are used to anticipate issues and draw the attention of Parliament in advance to any problems that may arise in the field of science and technology. The Board will welcome suggestions from individual members but feels that to move to a more short-term responsive mode would merely resurrect the question of duplication with the Library.

In recommending a continuation of current practice, the Board recognises that its decisions must be, and be seen to be under full parliamentary control. The Board confirms that its suggestion that the Board might be maintained in its current mixed (Parliamentarian/non-Parliamentarian) form would retain parliamentary control because voting would be restricted to Parliamentarians who are, moreover, always in the majority. However, an alternative constitution can be suggested; the Board could comprise only the Parliamentarians (with the Director of POST and the Librarian's nominee as non-voting Members), and could rely on a separate technical committee or special advisors as appropriate for input from the engineering and science community.

#### 7. RESOURCES

POST's current size (Director, office support and three full-time scientists/engineers) is the minimum possible compatible with responding to issues over the full range of science and technology. This resource could complete four to six full technology assessments each year, as well as a limited number of shorter analyses.

The process of technology assessment seeks to gather, integrate and interpret the expertise of the nation on specific science-based issues, and requires that its staff conduct a detailed examination of both science and policy, and deal with the key players in both science and policy worlds. For this reason we use staff with postgraduate qualifications, with relevant additional broadening experience in science and/or policy. In linking the Director's position to grade 5, the Board saw the position as having similarities to a Deputy Principal Clerk in a number of respects, while analogous in others to the heads of other small offices (Deliverer of the Vote or Computer Officer). In the event of this or other posts being absorbed into the Parliamentary Civil Service, the Board would expect the normal procedures of staff inspection to determine future gradings.

## APPENDIX 16

### Further Memorandum submitted by the Director of Finance and Administration (INF/33)

#### PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (POST)

At their last meeting the Information Committee requested an examination by myself and the Librarian of whether POST's technological assessment work could be better achieved by additional resources within the House of Commons Library.

The joint Library/POST paper (INF/ 27) it is hoped will largely eliminate overlapping between POST and the Library in respect of the shorter briefing notes.

At previous meetings the Librarian has confirmed that the Library's aim is to provide a direct, close, reactive service to Members. The Library is also clear that, because of lack of staff in the Science and Environment Section (which was last increased in 1983), they are currently unable to respond to some Members' requests for background papers, but that with this considerable Library resource, one or two more staff would result both in significantly more papers for Members quickly and a wider pool of scientists for individual Members to consult direct—as with other Library research services but these papers would not be the same as the technological assessments papers by POST to date.

The conclusion is, therefore, that POST's current technological assessment work could not be satisfactorily carried out within the Library and would be difficult to integrate with the Library's primary objective.

On the assumption that the Committee do approve the principle of parliamentary funding of POST's technological assessment work, and agree the concept of a POST board, comprising a majority of parliamentarians but also linking to the academic world, I summarise the funding options:

- (a) Contributing a guaranteed minimum sum to a separate agency for a minimum of, say, five technological assessments per annum. Extra work on behalf of Select Committees would be charged for separately. A commitment of, I suggest, £125,000 per annum for three years might give an incentive for POST to attain a maximum added value of outside contributions, sales of product and fellowships to a similar amount. POST believe such outside funding, apart from one COPUS fellowship, would not be forthcoming.
- (b) POST core staff transferring to the House administration, perhaps for management purposes being located within the Clerk's Department, as for Broadcasting. Providing the appointment were on a term basis and the work subject to very clear qualitative and quantitative review, there is no material difference in the administration costs between options (a) and (b). The total cost of the staff and overhead considered necessary by POST for five technological assessments, i.e., a director, secretary and three scientists, remain, as in my previous paper, £170,000 per annum with an optional £50,000 for two fellowships on an "as need" basis. The positions would be subject to Staff Inspector and Commission approval. The process of technological assessment requires a level of analysis and involvement with leading experts which necessitates scientists and engineers qualified to post-graduate level, preferably with suitable additional skill experience. Such staff are to be graded at SEO or Grade 7 depending on experience. The analogy the POST board selected for director was the Deputy Principal Clerk (Grade 5).
- (c) Select Committees might wish to commission their own technological assessments on an "as needed" basis, from the best available independent source. There would need to be an expert filter to establish impartiality.

The key, I suggest, for the Committee to consider, if funding is agreed in principle, is the degree of independence deemed desirable for POST's objectives.

In view of the pending Election and likely disruption to the Committee's work, a decision on any funding to be requested for the years commencing 1 April 1993, 1994 and 1995 would be desirable as the three-year plan (PES) will be prepared during March and April 1992. The question of the structure of POST could be further examined nearer the start of that financial year. Without some commitment from Parliament, there may be some damage to POST's continuing work before the end of March 1993.

## APPENDIX 17

## Memorandum submitted by the Medical Research Council (INF/34)

## PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

My apologies for the delay in replying to your letter of 19 December. We are grateful to the Information Committee for giving us the opportunity to comment on the future of POST.

In response to the specific questions posed by the Committee:

- (i) Our impression is that, given its present resources, POST is not in a position to undertake wide-ranging enquiries of the scientific community. As a consequence a significant proportion—perhaps the majority—of the scientific community is unaware of the important role that POST can play.
- (ii) We find it hard to comment on the overall level of staff resources that POST might need. However, it would be our view that, given the level of Parliamentary interest in medical issues, POST should have at least one and possibly two, full-time biomedical scientists on its staff. I see that there is a reference in INF/4 (at paragraph 2.4) to the possibility of introducing secondements from the Research Councils. This is certainly an option that we would be interested in exploring.
- (iii) On the question of the administrative and financial mechanisms we would, like the POST Board, favour the OTA model and hence option 3 (Parliamentary organisation).

18 February 1992

## APPENDIX 18

## Further Memorandum submitted by the Librarian, House of Commons (INF/36)

## Science and Environment Section

| <i>Inquiry load</i> | <i>Total inquiries</i> |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1991                | 1,320                  |
| 1990                | 1,279                  |
| 1989                | 1,218                  |
| 1988                | 1,054                  |
| 1987                | 1,000                  |

The total staff of the Section was last increased in 1983, by one Assistant Library Clerk. During the present Parliament the trend of inquiries has been as set out in the table above.

Enlargement of the Section by one or two additional Assistant Library Clerks would bring it into line with Research Sections dealing with other major subject areas (e.g., economics) and would have the following advantages: a broader range of qualifications in an area covering many disciplines; an improved quality of response to individual Members' inquiries; the capacity for the Library to provide information on scientific aspects of subjects not currently covered in this way; and a substantially larger output of papers covering scientific and technological matters of concern to Members.

Production of papers with a significant scientific content has been running at nine or 10 a year since 1989. An additional Assistant Library Clerk would make possible an output of some 18 a year (two a month while the House is sitting). A second additional Assistant Library Clerk would probably be most effectively committed to improving further the quality and range as well as the number of papers, and of responses to inquiries.

The cost of adding an Assistant Library Clerk to the Library's establishment is calculated by the Finance Office (for PES purposes) at c. £21,500 (mid-point of salary range plus National Insurance). Two additional Assistant Library Clerks would be likely to increase the secretarial workload by half a full-time equivalent; so the cost of such a strengthening of the Section would probably not exceed £50,000.

18 February 1992



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